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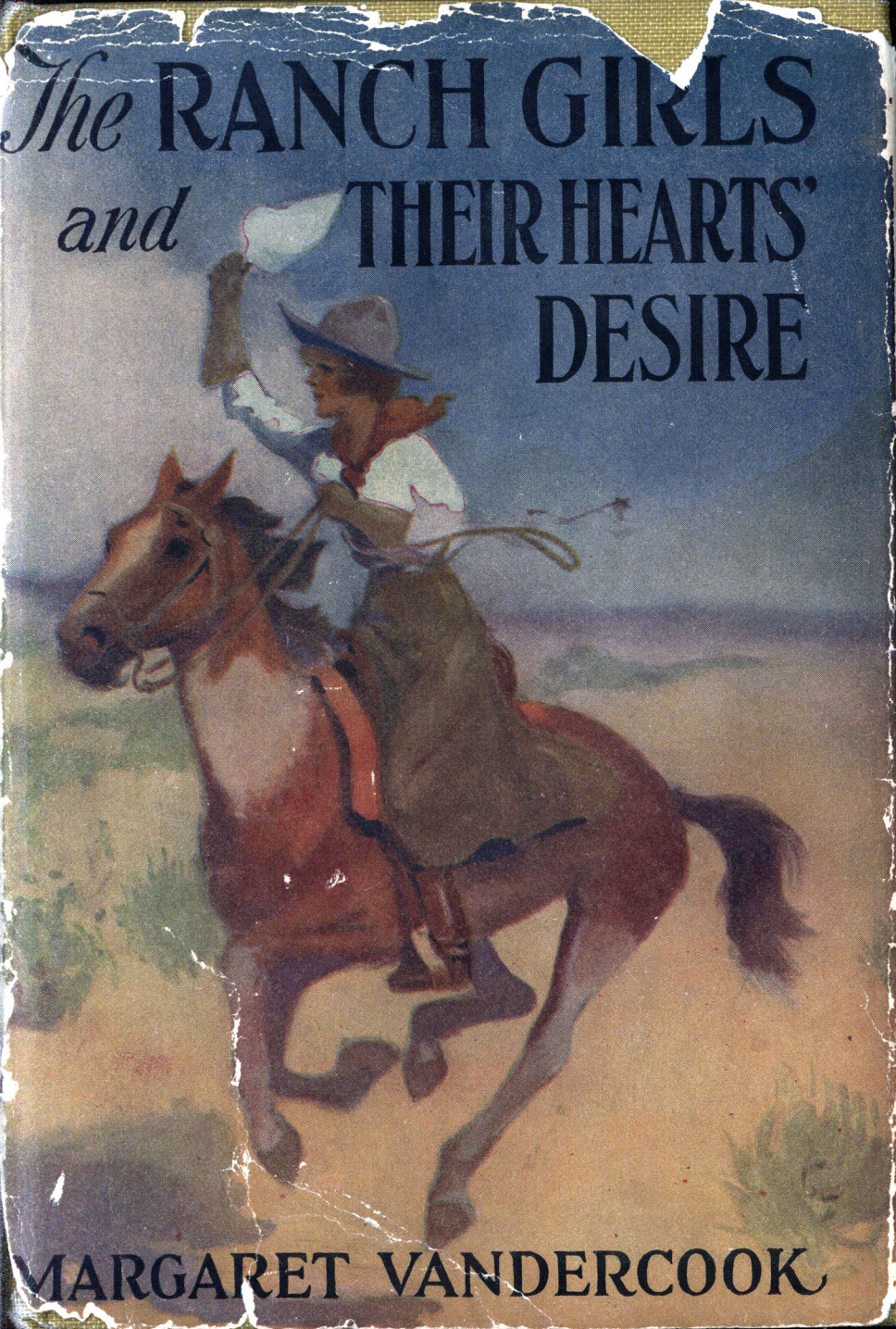

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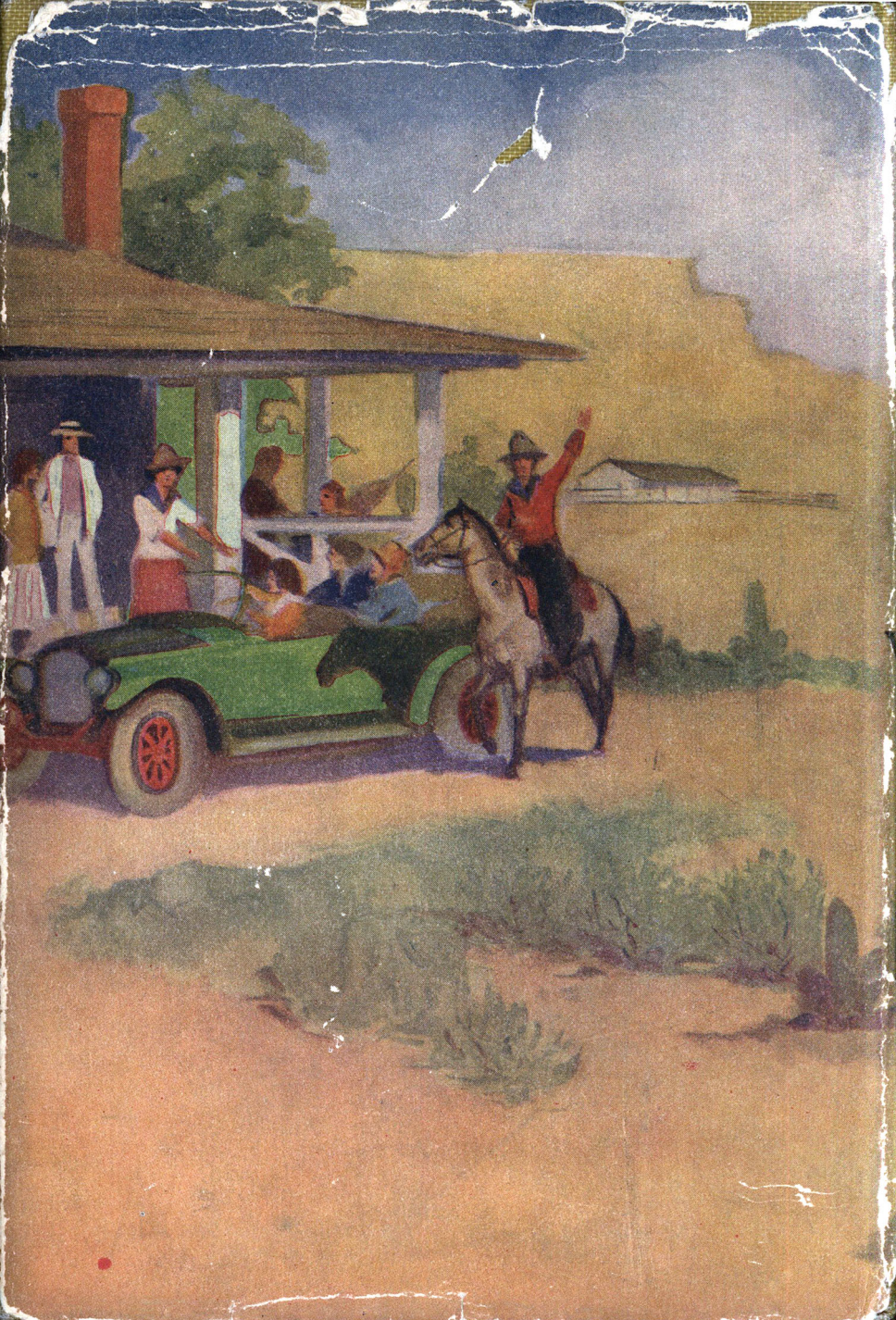

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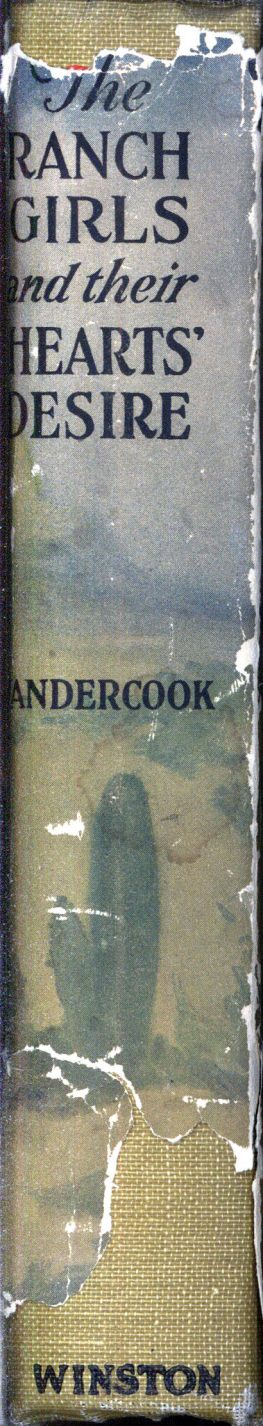

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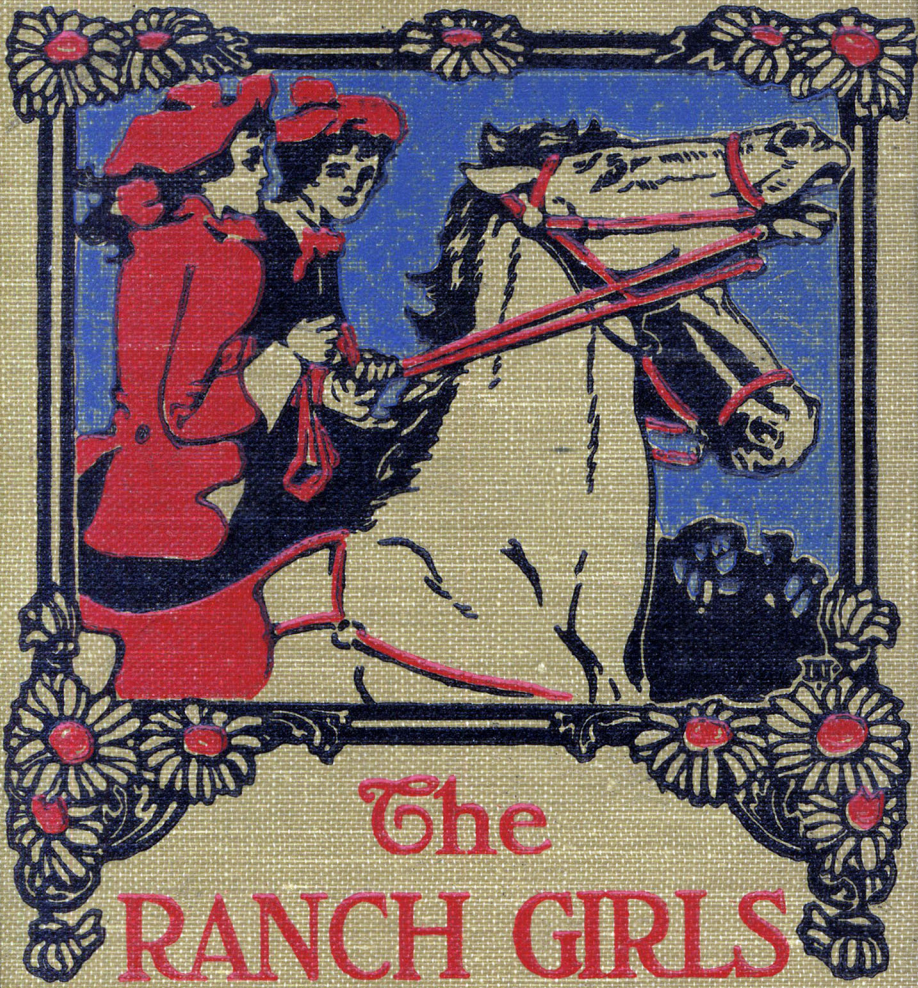

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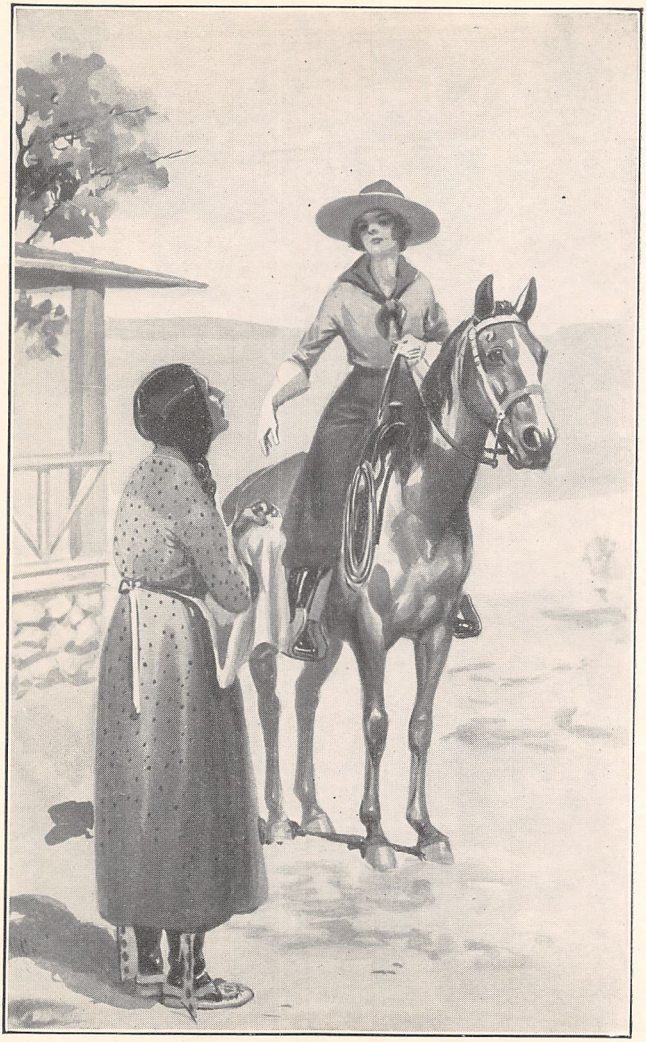

BEFORE LEAVING, SHE EXPLAINED TO THE OLD HALF-INDIAN WOMAN THAT SHE WOULD NOT RETURN UNTIL DINNER TIME

THE RANCH GIRLS SERIES

The Ranch Girls and Their Heart's Desire

—BY—
MARGARET VANDERCOOK

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The Ranch Girls and Their Heart's Desire

CHAPTER I

THE BRANCH OF THE TREE

ACROSS a wide prairie a man and woman were riding side by side at an hour approaching twilight on a September afternoon. Moving slowly they appeared to be studying the landscape.

Toward the west the sky was banked with gold and rose and purple clouds, while the earth revealed the same colors in the yellow sand of the desert spaces, the wide fields of purple clover, and the second blooming of the prairie roses.

"Strange to have you living at the old Rainbow ranch again, Jack, and yet under the circumstances perhaps the most natural thing in the world! Long ago when I was a young fellow I learned that when human

beings are hurt they follow the instincts of the homing birds who seek the nest. You have always loved the old ranch better than any place in the world, more than the other girls ever loved it, so with the news of your husband's death I knew you would return from England and bring your son with you, Lady Kent, once Jacqueline Ralston of the Rainbow ranch. Somehow I never have learned to think of you, Jack, by your title of Lady Kent."

"No, Jim, and why should you?" the girl answered. "I never learned to think of myself in that fashion. I am going to confide something to you, Jim Colter. I always have confided my secrets to you since I was a little girl. I never learned during the years of my married life in England to feel that I was anything but a stranger there. Yet for my husband's sake I did my best to like England and try to make English people like me. I was never specially successful. I presume I am hopelessly an American and, what may be worse, hopelessly western. At present I feel that I wish to spend all the rest of my life in Wyoming. But one is not often allowed to do what one wishes. This morning I received letters from Eng-

land, all of them asking when I intended to return and settle down as Dowager Lady Kent at Kent House, to bring up little Jimmie in a manner becoming a future British Lord. The worst of it is I don't want to go back and I don't want to bring up my son as an aristocrat. My husband was an Englishman, but I am an American and have never believed in titles. Frank had no title when I married him. I want little Jimmie to be half an American anyhow and wholly a democrat. What must I do, Jim Colter, stay here on the ranch with my own people and lead the life I love, or go to England and spend half my time amid the conventional society existence I loathe, and the other half playing Lady Bountiful to the poor people of a small village?"

Jacqueline Ralston, who *was* Lady Kent, regardless of her own protest, now reined in her horse, and rising in her saddle let her glance sweep the wide horizon.

In the wide, gray eyes, in the low, level brow, in the full, generous lips and abundant vitality one might have recognized the pioneer spirit, infrequent in human beings, but more infrequent in women than in men. Yet this Jacqueline Ralston Kent, one of

the original four "Ranch Girls of the Rainbow Lodge," possessed. All her life she had loved personal freedom, wide spaces, a simple, every-day, outdoor existence without formality. She felt a natural intimacy with the people who attracted her without consideration for their social position. Yet in so contrary a fashion does fate deal with us that Jack had spent the greater part of her married life under exactly opposite conditions.

"For my part I don't dare advise you, Jack, I so want you to stay on at the Rainbow lodge, more than I wish anything else in the world at present. With Ruth gone, I don't see how I shall ever get on with my four new little Rainbow ranch girls without you to help mother them. Yet I had pretty much the same experience once before! Odd how circumstances repeat themselves! You must first do what you think best for Jimmie. What does the boy himself wish to do, stay here at the ranch and learn to be a ranchman under my training, or go back to Kent House?"

Laughing Jack shook her head, crowned with gold brown hair; she was without a hat, after her old custom.

"You know the answer to that question as well as I do, Jim. Jimmie adores the ranch. He is named for you, and you have done everything in your power to make him love it. Then I must have implanted my own affection for the freedom of our western life in my little son. Jimmie insists that he wants nothing better in the future than to stay on here and run the ranch and the mine when you and I have grown too old to be troubled with such responsibilities. He is only eight years old at present and so we need not feel laid on the shelf at once."

"No, but I am not young as I was, Jack, hair is turning pretty gray these days," Jim Colter answered. "I have never mentioned this to the boy, but I have wanted the same thing he does. I would like Jimmie to live here and perhaps marry one of my four girls and keep the old ranch in the family through another generation or so. Sentiment of course, yet so far Jimmie is the only son on the horizon! Here I am with four daughters, Jean and Ralph Merritt with two, Olive and Captain MacDonnell with no children, and Frieda's and Professor Russell's little girl so frail that it is hard to count on any future for her."

At this Jack's expression clouded. A moment later she again arose in her saddle, this time pointing toward the eastern portion of the Rainbow ranch. To the west and north lay the gold mine discovered years before, though no longer yielding a supply of gold as in its early days

The mine had never interested either Jacqueline Ralston or Jim Colter as it had the other members of the family. They had been horse and cattle raisers before a mine was ever dreamed of, and it was the rearing of the livestock for which Jim and Jack cared intensely to this day.

Riding through the ranch, every half hour or so they had passed a herd of cattle browsing amid the purple alfalfa grass, seen the sleek brown cows standing with their young calves close beside them. Less often they had run across a small drove of horses and young colts, as horses were no longer so good an investment as in the old days. Yet the present Rainbow ranch owners would prefer to have lost money than be without them, the horses having always received Jack's especial affection and attention as a girl and upon her occasional visits home to the ranch after her English marriage.

"Can that be a herd of horses or cattle stampeding there toward the east, Jim? We are too far off to see distinctly; suppose we ride in that direction," Jack said unexpectedly.

Wasting no time in words Jim Colter nodded. The following moment both horses, their noses pointing eastward, were galloping across the open prairie fields and away from the road.

Experienced ranchmen, he and his companion appreciated that the cloud of dust and the grouping of dark bodies advancing toward them with unusual rapidity represented trouble of some kind. At this time of the year it seemed scarcely possible that a wolf had stolen from the pack and frightened one of the herds. Yet there was no accounting for the tricks of nature. Moreover, frequently a number of horses or cattle suffered from group fear, the one transmitting the fright to the other without apparent reason.

Half a mile away the drove of young horses, which Jim Colter had finally located with his field glasses, turned and swerved south.

Almost as swiftly the two riders moved

off in the same direction, hoping they might be able to divide the frightened animals and drive them apart.

A quarter of a mile farther along, riding at no great distance from each other, Jim Colter heard an exclamation from his companion, so sudden, so terrified and so unexpected that he reined his own horse sharply until for an instant it stood trembling on its hind legs, its slender nose snuffing the soft air.

"Tell me, Jim, is that Jimmie's pony ahead of us? The saddle is on the pony, but no one is riding. Jimmie can't have ridden over here alone? He can't be anywhere near-by?"

Yet even as the question was being asked, the man and woman saw and, seeing, understood.

The pony which Jack had spied with the bridle dangling over its head was moving from place to place nibbling at the most luxurious patches of clover. Beyond, and closer to the trampling herd of panic-stricken animals, lay a small figure, outstretched on the ground and probably until this moment asleep.

Whether he now heard the oncoming horses

or the cries of his mother and guardian, in any case, awakening, he jumped to his feet and the same instant turned, beheld, and understood his own danger. In a few moments, seconds perhaps, the frightened animals would be upon him, trampling, snorting, unconscious of his presence in their frenzy.

As the boy ran across the field toward his pony, he had the consciousness that the two persons for whom he cared most in the world were coming toward him to save him from harm. Yet he also appreciated this would not be possible, as they could not reach him in time.

But Jimmie Kent was not to make the whole effort alone. As he ran he called his pony's name.

"Whitestar! Whitestar!" The boy's tones remained firm and commanding.

Whitestar had observed her own danger. The pony's head went up, showing the mark upon her pretty nose which had given her the name. A single time she pawed the earth in front of her, appearing about to rush *away* without her master, and then she cantered toward the boy.

The oncoming drove of terrified animals was now only a few yards away.

"Don't lose courage, Jack, he is your son, remember! He will win out," Jim Colter shouted, his own horse scarcely appearing to touch the earth as it ran.

"Drive straight toward them, Jimmie, don't try to cross their path," Jim called, his voice sounding unfamiliar to his own ears.

Yet either the boy heard or recognized his one chance.

Without hesitation the little figure lying close to his saddle was riding straight toward the center of the drove of twenty or thirty frightened animals. The leader, a few feet in advance of the others, apparently ran in a direct line with the boy.

Her eyes never turning for an instant from the little figure, now not thirty yards away, Jack understood what must take place. Should the leader come on without swerving Jimmie would be unseated, his pony struck down and the other horses would pass over them both. But, should Jimmie possess the courage or, greater than courage, the strength of will to force the horse in advance of the drove to swerve either toward the right or left, the others would follow.

A moment later and Jack's arms were about her son.

"You've turned the trick, Jimmie," Jim Colter was saying roughly. "But it is the front yard of the Rainbow lodge for you for the next week. How dared you ride over the ranch alone when I have told you it was forbidden? Now you and your mother get home as soon as you can and send whatever men you come across in this direction. I suppose the horses will have tired themselves out after a few more miles of running, but it is just as well to see they are quieted down."

So Jim Colter rode away in one direction and Jimmie and his mother in the other toward the Rainbow lodge.

CHAPTER II

THE YOUNGER SET

THE front yard of the Rainbow lodge appeared an extremely small playground for a boy accustomed to covering many miles of the broad ranch and the adjoining country in the course of each day. Yet as Jim Colter's word was law on the Rainbow ranch Jimmie Kent had no thought of breaking parole.

He glanced up at the double rows of tall cottonwood trees which led from the lodge to the gate. Almost impossibly difficult trees to climb because of their tall, smooth trunks and the branches so high overhead! A warm September day and Rainbow creek not half a mile away! Jimmie taxed his imagination until he could well-nigh feel himself swimming about in the cool freshness of the little stream, deeper than usual at the present time because of the abundant September rains. When one's swim ended, not far away were his mother, his Aunt Jean and her husband Ralph Merritt, a clever

mining engineer. The family was to meet this afternoon to discuss the possibility of sinking a new shaft into the old Rainbow mine with the hope of striking a new lode.

Moreover, Jim Colter (and Jimmie and the big man were so intimate as to use each other's first names) was attending to the branding of a herd of calves at one of the ranch houses. Any one, or all, of these entertainments might have been his, except for an unfortunate impulse to investigate the Rainbow ranch alone a few afternoons before.

A week of the front yard of the lodge appeared an interminable time to Jimmie Kent, yet even a week would pass in time. And one had better be half a prisoner at the old ranch than free in any other part of the world.

Six weeks before having arrived at the ranch after a long journey from England, at present this was Jimmie Kent's earnest conviction. Was there anywhere else in the world such a wide sweep of country, such plains and prairies and desert sands covered with sage brush and cacti? In the prairies there were wolves and deer and bear. Since his arrival at the ranch Jimmie believed he had heard one night the call of

a wolf, the leader of the pack, and coyotes he had seen with his own eyes, sniffing about the edge of the woods not far from Rainbow creek. Jim Colter had suggested that the buffalo were not all destroyed, but might be found roaming in certain western portions of the state, now inhabited only by wandering Indian tribes. He had hinted at mountain lions as not wholly a figment of a boy's dreams, but as realities, creatures Jim Colter had beheld with his own eyes long years before, when the west was the west indeed.

Yet here he was, Jimmie Kent, late of Kent House, Kent county, England, suddenly transformed into an American boy, but shut up within an acre of ground for a week and, moreover, face to face with the tragic possibility that within a month or more he might be forced to return to England. He had nothing against England except that it was too small for a boy's energies and hopelessly devoid of wild animals outside the London Zoo.

India of course was a possession of the British Empire, and South Africa, but Jimmie felt that probably for a number of years he might not be permitted to explore these

regions. So why the present discussion? If he and his mother both desired to remain at the Rainbow ranch at least for a number of years, they ought to be able to decide for themselves. Nevertheless his mother had explained that she must continue to think the situation over and to ask the advice of her family. To-night the grown-up members of the family were even to dine together for this purpose.

Discovering a cottonwood tree not far from the gate, Jimmie now climbed up and seated himself upon one of the lower branches. Here he was enabled to have a wide outlook.

Behind him was the Rainbow lodge where he and his mother were living at the present time. So often Jimmie Kent had been told its history! Here his mother with her sister, Frieda Ralston, and her cousin Jean Bruce, had lived when the three of them were little girls and under the guardianship of Jim Colter, the manager of their father's ranch after his death Later the fourth ranch girl had found refuge with them, escaping from an Indian woman in whose charge she had been for so many years that her early childhood was enshrouded in mystery.

From his present viewpoint Jimmie Kent was able to observe two figures not at a great distance away. They were Captain MacDonnell and his wife, who had been Olive to the other ranch girls until the discovery of her parentage.

Captain MacDonnell, injured in the great war, later had developed his talent as an artist. Jimmie possessed the ordinary small boy's attitude toward pictures, nevertheless he had something to say in favor of Captain MacDonnell's, since *his* reputation had been acquired through his painting of western scenes.

At the present moment he was sketching a mustang pony, which one of the ranch boys was leading back and forth in an effort to persuade the pony to remain within the range of the artist's vision. Jimmie would have enjoyed changing places with the other boy. In spite of Captain Bryan MacDonnell's lameness he had an especial understanding and love of the outdoors, to such an extent that he and his wife were spending a year or more at the Rainbow ranch, living in a tent, regardless of the fact that at the great house built after the discovery of the Rainbow mine there was room for any number of guests.

Jimmie now glanced over toward the splendid mansion which had been christened "Rainbow Castle" by Frieda Ralston years before. His Aunt Frieda and her distinguished if eccentric husband, Professor Henry Tilford Russell and their one little girl were at present visitors at Rainbow Castle, having arrived only a day or so before.

Jimmie was no more interested in relatives as relatives than most small boys. Yet had his preference been asked he would have said freely that he liked best his Aunt Jean and his uncle Ralph Merritt, possibly because a famous engineer who had been not only the engineer of the Rainbow mine but of several other mines would appeal to any masculine imagination. Then possessing no sons of her own and greatly desiring one, his Aunt Jean was particularly kind to him.

At this moment Jimmie became especially grateful to fate for his exalted position in the tree top. Advancing toward him he beheld his seven girl cousins.

"Eight cousins!" Some one was always muttering this tiresome exclamation, as if there was any special point in it. Personally Jimmie considered the one drawback to his residence in the United States was

the possession of such an affliction. Not that he disliked the seven girls; two or three of them were fairly agreeable. One could not dislike the little girl, who was scarcely more than a baby, and whose name was Peace, she was so pretty and so gentle. She had been called Peace though named for her mother, because no one wished to repeat the name Frieda during the war.

The seven cousins and two nurses were now entering the yard of the Rainbow lodge and Jimmie Kent wondered if he preferred not to be discovered. He guessed their errand: they intended gathering violets from the violet beds on either side the house, planted years before by Frieda Ralston in an effort to increase the family fortunes, and now famous throughout the neighborhood.

In advance were the four daughters of Jim Colter, whom he described as the four new Rainbow Ranch girls and whose names were also Jacqueline, Jean, Olive, and Frieda, although called Lina, Jeannette, Olivia, and Eda, to distinguish them from the original "Ranch Girls of the Rainbow Lodge." The three visitors with the maids were following.

An instant Jimmie considered whether it

might not be a good idea to allow Jeannette Colter to observe his present elevation. She was the one of the seven girls he most disliked. A few months his elder, she boasted that she could ride and run and climb equally well with the new English boy visitor. She could learn to shoot equally well if her father offered her an equal opportunity.

The truth was that if Jimmie considered he disliked Jeannette, she cordially hated him. Before Jimmie's coming she had been her father's constant companion, riding with him about the ranch as Jacqueline Ralston had done in the years past. But three times of late had her father left her at home with her sisters, saying that he wanted to ride alone with Jimmie in order better to make his acquaintance.

Now Jimmie felt a reasonable pride in the fact that Jeannette would not be able to occupy such a position as his present one without assistance.

"Hello," he called down. The other girls waved and returned his greeting, but Jeannette Colter laughed.

"Up a tree, aren't you, in more ways than one, Jimmie Kent! I am sorry you cannot leave the front yard for a week," which

was not kind or truthful in Jeannette, who was especially pleased by Jimmie's captivity since it restored her to her father's uninterrupted companionship.

At the close of the day, having finished his solitary dinner—his mother was dining at the big house—Jimmie came out on the veranda of the lodge and went to bed in the big porch hammock where he often spent the night.

Several hours later, half awakened by the return of his mother and Jim Colter from the family dinner party, but too drowsy to speak, nevertheless Jimmie overheard his mother announce in a tone of relief:

"Well, Jim, thank goodness I have been able to make up my mind at last! Indecision, you know, always has annoyed me more than anything else in the world. So it is to be the Rainbow ranch and my own country for as many years as I can arrange it. And may they be as many years as you need me, Jim."

His friend's reply made Jimmie Kent smile and settle himself more comfortably in his hammock bed. The reply gave one a pleasant sense of permanency.

"Then if you never leave the United States

until I cease to need you, Jack, you won't go away until I am removed to broader fields than the Rainbow ranch. But do you think you will be happy, that is the main thing? What will you do with yourself? These are restless days for most women and you have more energy than any woman I have ever known. Want a career, Jacqueline Ralston Kent? Are you staying in your own country because you wish to be a famous woman some day and the United States offers the best opportunity?"

"Suppose we sit down a while, Jim," Jack answered. "You are not sleepy, are you? It is too lovely a night!"

Walking over to the hammock, Jack pulled up a warm covering over her son and as he smiled up at her, whispered,

"We won't disturb you, will we, Jimmie?" and Jimmie only shook his head, not wishing to speak, yet enjoying the distant sound of the two voices he loved best.

A moment later Jim Colter and Jack were sitting together upon one of the front steps of the Rainbow lodge as they had sat together so many times in years past, always preferring to be in some spot where there were no walls closed about them but where there was a wide view of sky and land.

"Don't laugh, Jim, but I don't know, yet laugh a little if you like, as it may be good for me. Yes, I have sometimes thought since Frank's death that I should like a career of my own, besides just being Jimmie's mother, proud as I am of that honor. Inside the secret corners of my mind the thought has influenced me a little in my desire to remain at home."

"But what is the great career to be?" Jim Colter answered smiling, and yet with a sufficient interest in his tone to take away any lack of sympathy that might have been conveyed by his amusement. "You aren't going to turn poet, or painter, or actress, Jack, after displaying no fondness for the arts in all these years?"

"No, Jim Colter, and no talents either," Jack returned. "I appreciate your veiled sarcasm. No, the good fairies who bestow the artistic gifts were not present at my birthday. What do you think I might be able to do, Jim? Tell me."

There was a short silence and then the man answered:

"Help me manage the Rainbow ranch, Jack, or a larger ranch if you like."

Jack shook her head.

"No, Jim, you have managed the ranch

successfully without me and though I may bore you by interfering now and then, to help you when you do not need help will not be the thing I am after. Would you hate it if I should take an interest in politics? It is an exciting world these days and after all Wyoming was the first state to give the vote to women! I wonder if I am still an American citizen. In marrying an Englishman I know I became a British subject while my husband was alive, but now he is dead and I have returned to my own country, the point is, what am I, Jim? A woman without a country?"

"Jack, I don't know. However, I should dislike your entering political life, but suppose you are old enough to decide for yourself." Jim Colter laughed. "You always did decide for yourself in the end, Jack, even when you were pretty young. But you will marry again some day! Suppose we ask an old friend of yours, Peter Stevens, whether at present you are an American citizen or a British subject? Stevens has become one of the distinguished young lawyers in the state, or in the west for that matter. But look out for him, Jack, he is an old bachelor and a woman hater. Now it must be nearly midnight. Good-night."

CHAPTER III

OLD PASTIMES

ONE Saturday afternoon several days later Jacqueline Kent, escaping from her family, rode alone down to the great ranch house a mile or more from the Rainbow lodge. She had not had an opportunity to visit the ranch house since her arrival at her former home. Yet as a young girl she always had enjoyed slipping off to the big ranch house unaccompanied by the other Ranch Girls and usually without Jim Colter's knowledge or consent. In the ranch house lived the ranchmen, or the cowboys who looked after the livestock on the great place.

To-day as Jack rode up to the house only three or four of the ranchmen were visible and they were standing on the rough log porch smoking and talking to one another.

But the four sombreros were immediately lifted, and one of the men came forward.

"Glad to see you, Lady Kent. Is there any order you wish to give, or any message?

Sorry the greater number of the fellows are not here at present. This is Saturday afternoon, you see, and a half holiday. They are off entertaining themselves, but we'll have the laugh on them when we tell them that we have had a visit from you."

The Wyoming cowboy spoke with a courtesy and self-possession Jack had often seen lacking among more distinguished persons. However, perhaps "distinguished" is not the proper adjective, since her present companion possessed, stored inside his kit, among the personal treasures in his rough, pine-wood chamber a Distinguished Service Medal presented him by the United States Government and a Croix de Guerre, the gift of a grateful France.

Jack shook her head.

"No, I haven't a message or an order. I merely wanted to see the old ranch house and be introduced to the men. But don't call me Lady Kent. I am Mrs. Kent; now that I have returned to my own country a title strikes me as an absurdity. It is hard enough to remember, these days, that I am not Jacqueline Ralston; the ranch is so like it used to be when I was a young girl. I am sorry not to find the other men, as I

rode over this afternoon knowing it was Saturday and hoping I might meet them. May I be introduced to the three men who are here, if they don't mind?"

Jack spoke with a mixture of shyness and friendliness entirely natural to her, but in the present circumstances, perhaps unusual.

The man to whom she was speaking was John Simmons, one of the assistant managers of the Rainbow ranch to whom Jim Colter had introduced her shortly after her arrival at her old home.

At a summons from him, the three other men rushed forward as if only awaiting the opportunity, and leaning from her horse, holding the bridle in her left hand, Jack shook hands cordially with her new acquaintances.

"More sport this, ma'am, than lassoing a wild colt!" one of the cowboys drawled, as Jack smiled upon him. His three companions, after first shouting with laughter, proceeded to frown upon the young fellow. He was only a boy not yet twenty-one, from the Kentucky mountains, who nevertheless had served with the American Expeditionary Forces in France for eighteen months.

"But are the men practicing lassoing this

afternoon? If they are, please do take me to see what is going on. Is there to be a contest?" Jack inquired. "I used to know something about the business myself, long ago when I was a girl. I have even tried using the lasso, although I was never a great success according to Jim Colter, who did his best to teach me."

"If you'll wait until we get our horses," John Simmons replied.

A few moments later Jack and her four masculine companions were galloping toward one of the farther boundaries of the Rainbow ranch.

After half an hour's steady riding they came upon from twenty to thirty young ranchmen gathered about an open stretch of country. A third of the men were employees of the Rainbow ranch, the others were from neighboring places.

The men were grouped together, some of them on horseback, others at present afoot. Not far away were a dozen western ponies still unbroken either for riding or driving, but captured and brought to this particular spot. Firmly tethered to stakes, they were now pawing the earth, tossing their pretty heads in the air and kicking and bucking if any one approached.

If the men were astonished by the appearance of Jacqueline Kent upon the scene, they were sufficiently polite to make no mention of the fact. If they exchanged glances of surprise or whispered comments, Jack was too little self-conscious and too interested in the spectacle before her and what was about to take place to consider her own position.

Apart from the group, facing a broad, flat prairie field were two of the ranchmen, a few yards separating them. Over their right arms hung their long lariats, coils of rope with a slip noose at the end.

A pony unloosed at a given signal would make a plunge for liberty. Then the two men with the lassos would be after him. The pony has a fair start in open field, and the race for freedom lies before him.

In her eager interest, scarcely realizing what she was doing, Jack made her way to the front line of the group of spectators, the men giving way to her partly from amusement and partly from courtesy. The larger number of them had no personal acquaintance with her, yet she was well enough known by reputation. One of the owners of the famous Rainbow ranch, herself a Ranch girl

until her marriage to an Englishman, the fact that since her husband's death Jacqueline Ralston Kent had returned home with the avowed intention of resuming her American citizenship was already become a subject for gossip, for approval or disapproval among her neighbors.

Staring at her secretly when the chance offered, there was in all probability the usual difference of opinion concerning her among the onlookers. But with one fact they would all have agreed: Lady Kent, or Mrs. Kent, as she was said to prefer being called, looked younger than any one who had heard her history could have thought possible.

In truth, this afternoon, in her usual informal fashion, Jack was wearing an old corduroy riding habit which she had left behind her at the Rainbow lodge several years before upon the occasion of her previous visit home. It was of dust color, plainly made with a long, close fitting coat and divided skirt. Her riding boots and gloves, however, were of the softest and most beautiful English manufacture; her hat of brown felt, with a broad brim.

This afternoon Jack's cheeks were a deep rose color, her eyes were glowing, her full

red lips were parted from excitement and pleasure as she watched.

Away toward the outermost bounds rushed the little untamed colt, his pursuers close on his track. Then a long rope swung through the air, coil on coil unloosed, rose beautiful as bubbles afloat, with the noose ready to capture and bring the pony to a standstill.

The first man is unsuccessful and the bystanders raise a shout of derision. This changes to applause when the second man slips his noose easily over the pony and gently draws it until the four protesting feet are held fast.

Then the pony is brought back, again tied to its stake and a second contest begins anew.

There was no cruelty in this sport, only a test of courage and skill, since sooner or later the wild ponies must be captured and tamed and taught to do their portion of the world's work.

Had she forgotten how exhilarating, how thrilling the lassoing was? Jack felt her heart pounding, her blood coursing more swiftly in her veins as she half stood in her saddle waving her applause at each victory.

"I suppose I should not dare attempt to find if I have altogether lost my skill?" she

asked of her companion, the assistant manager of the Rainbow ranch, who had managed to keep near her all afternoon. "Would it bore the men dreadfully to have me take part, do you think? Of course I ought not to be willing to disgrace myself before so many people."

As a matter of fact, Jack was talking to herself, arguing with her own desire, as well as asking the advice of her companion.

"I don't know. Do you realize that if one is out of practice roping is a fairly dangerous sport, Mrs. Kent? I don't think I would undertake it," John Simmons protested.

But Jack found an unexpected ally.

Without her being aware of it, the young Kentuckian whom she had met for the first time at the ranch house a short while before, had remained as faithful an escort as the assistant manager of the ranch, and a more devoted one, since John Simmons regarded the protection of Mrs. Kent under the present circumstances as his duty, while with Billy Preston there was no question of duty but of pleasure.

"You don't mean you've got the nerve to git into the present game, Mrs. Kent?" he queried, his manner perfectly respectful,

in spite of the oddity of his speech. "I've been ridin' all my days, was pretty nigh born on a horse, anyhow used to hang on when I couldn't 'a' been more'n two or three years old, 'cause there wasn't no other way of gittin' up or down our hills in them days. But this here lassoing game, I'm not on to *it* yet. Seems like it would be kind of worth while to see you go after one of them colts and rope her and lead her in same as one of the men. I can't come to believe a woman could ever manage it."

"Maybe I could not," Jack answered, but both her interest and vanity were stimulated. It was a curious fact that she had so little personal vanity in most things, and yet like a boy had a boy's ambition if not a boy's vanity with regard to outdoor pastimes.

Disappearing a moment, Billy Preston rode up again soon after with one of the other ranchmen, who happened to be in charge of the afternoon's contest.

"If you would like to try your hand, Mrs. Kent, and are not afraid of getting into trouble, why of course there is no objection. Any one of the fellows will be glad of the chance to ride beside you and give you the first throw."

Jack laughed, hesitated and weakened. As a matter of fact, she should have known better than to make an exhibition of herself before a group of strange young men; her instinct, her experience, her judgment, should have taught her better. They did whisper their protest, it was Jack's fault that she did not heed them, this being her particular failure in life that she could not see that things which were not intrinsically wrong in themselves were oftentimes wrong when done at the wrong time and in the wrong place.

"You don't think I would be too great a bore? Then may I borrow some one's horse? My own is not accustomed to the lassoing."

A short time after, actually unconscious of the unconventionality of her behavior, Jacqueline Kent with the lariat swung over her arm, before an audience of perhaps thirty or more amused and absorbed spectators, was awaiting the moment to ride forward.

The soft prairie winds blew against her face, bringing their familiar fragrances, the circle of mountains far away on the dim horizons had their summits crowned with

snow. About her, whinnying and neighing, their slender nostrils quivering with interest in the sport, were the western horses she had loved almost as she loved people from the time she was little more than a baby. As for her audience, Jack really gave it scarcely any thought so keyed was she to the business in hand. Had she altogether forgotten her past prowess? A moment before she had not been entirely truthful, for she had possessed an unusual skill in every phase of western riding as a young girl, and especially skilful in what she was about to undertake.

Yet at present the rope hung slack on her arm with an odd feeling of unfamiliarity. An instant later Jack flung it in the air, saw it coil and uncoil, heard the singing noise it made, and then drew it back into place, feeling an added confidence.

The following instant she was after the pony, her companion riding a few feet behind her, but making no effort with his own lasso.

Jack had asked for no quarter, yet was to be afforded every chance. Once her rope rose, sailed forward and then dropped slack to the ground, the pony cantering on ahead undisturbed, and uncaptured.

In her accustomed fashion laughing at her own failure, Jack settled more firmly to her task, spurring her horse ahead.

A second time her rope shot forward and now the pony crumpled and went down upon its forelegs, Jack drawing the lasso and holding it until her companion took the rope from her hand.

Then she turned to ride back to her former place.

Now Jack felt herself blushing warmly and for the first time became aware of her conspicuous position.

Her audience was laughing and shouting their surprised applause, hats were being waved in the air. There in front of the others and on foot, Jack beheld Jim Colter, and only a few times in her life could she recall having seen his face reveal such an expression of disapproval.

"Making an exhibition of yourself, Jack?" he asked after she had dismounted and stood beside him. Then he turned to one of his own ranchmen. "Will you bring Mrs. Kent's horse back to the Rainbow lodge? She will drive home with me."

Led away as if she were a disgraced schoolgirl, Jack suffered a number of conflicting

emotions—anger, rebellion, embarrassment, and repentance and some amusement. Surely the time had arrived when her former guardian should recognize that she was a woman and not a child. Then Jack appreciated that she should have recognized the fact herself and not made an exhibition of herself as Jim had just said.

"You won't tell the family what I have done, will you, please, Jim?" Jack asked when they were a safe distance away. "I know I have behaved badly and I suppose it does no good to say that I never appreciated the fact until I had the first look at your face. I hate to have you angry, Jim."

"You will be the talk of the countryside, Jacqueline Kent, and who knows where else?" Jim Colter answered. "It's incredible that you did not realize this. In less than an hour it will be on every tongue that Lady Kent has returned to Wyoming to seek the society of the cowboys and ranchmen and to engage in their rough sports, and please remember it also will be reported that she seeks their companionship with no other women present. Fine beginning, Jack."

"You are pretty hateful, Jim. I thought you used to tell me not to mind idle gossip."

"I did, Jack, but not when the gossip was justified by your behavior. As for my keeping your recent act a secret from the rest of the family, it is not possible. Frieda and Professor Russell, Olive and Captain MacDonnell, and your former acquaintance, Peter Stevens, are in the motor car waiting for you, unfortunately so near as to be aware of your proceedings. We motored over to Laramie this afternoon and asked Stevens if he knew what steps you should take in order to resume your American citizenship. He was not altogether sure and explained he thought it would be wiser to look the question up. As he was free for the evening Frieda invited him to motor to the ranch with us and meet you again. Finding you had gone down to the ranch house, we went in search of you. Ching Lee, who is the present cook at the ranch house, informed me you had ridden over here with Simmons, which was in itself sufficiently unconventional, Jack, without the unexpected addition I saw when I left the motor and came to look for you."

"Good gracious, Frieda will never let me hear the last of this!" Jack exclaimed. "It is rather too much to have an old acquaint-

ance like Peter Stevens, who never liked or approved of me even in my youth, as another witness to my discomfiture. Perhaps you would prefer I return to England after all, Jim! Can't you forgive me before I join the others; I'll have sufficient disapproval to endure then without yours. I wonder if I dare face Frieda. I'll never make a mistake like this again."

But for once Jim Colter refused to yield to Jack's pleading, being more deeply disturbed by her action because of its consequent reaction upon her than he had been in some time past. Beautiful, young and daring, with unusual wealth, perhaps it might be wiser if Jack should marry again, hard as it would be for him to give her up a second time.

CHAPTER IV

A FORMER ACQUAINTANCE

"I WAS never so ashamed of any one in my life."

Jack flushed, but, ignoring her sister's speech, extended her hand to the young man who was seated in the motor car beside her.

"I am afraid you don't remember me," she began, "it has been a long time, and we never knew each other intimately in the past. But it is kind of you to have driven over to the ranch."

Then getting into the car, Jack sat down in the vacant place which had been saved for her between her sister and their visitor.

"Just the same, I believe I should have known you," Peter Stevens returned, looking at her with what Jack considered was certainly not an expression of admiration. "Do you think, Mrs. Kent, a fellow is apt to forget a girl who could ride and hunt and shoot better than nearly any young man in Wyoming? I was a bookworm in those

days and have remained one, but that did not prevent my jealousy of you."

"Please don't refer to my dreadful outdoor accomplishments," Jack murmured, "not after I have gotten myself into such disfavor with my family." The little glance, half of appeal, half of humor which she at this instant bestowed upon her companion made the muscles of his face suddenly relax and his blue eyes less cold, so that Jack caught at least a fleeting likeness to the boy she had once known.

As a matter of fact, Peter Stevens, who was still in the early twenties, had appeared so much older than she had dreamed possible that Jack would not have recognized him without first having been told his name.

Then his face hardened again.

"Well, most of us grow up, Mrs. Kent, but perhaps you are one of the persons who do not. I am told you prefer not to use your title in the United States."

To Jack's mind, as there was plainly no answer to this speech with its scarcely courteous reference to her recent impulsive action, she turned toward her sister.

Frieda Ralston had developed into the type of matron one might have expected from her

spoiled girlhood and—more important—her childish and self-satisfied temperament. She dearly loved her older sister; except for her husband and baby, she loved no one so well; but she also loved the opportunity to assume an attitude of offended dignity which usually had succeeded in making the members of her family do as she wished.

Moreover her sister's recent escapade had seriously shocked and annoyed her, not for her own sake, but for her sister's. She had wished Jack to make a charming impression among their neighbors and old friends. No one, as she believed, could be handsomer or more delightful than her sister, Lady Kent, and Frieda declined to lay aside the title. Yet here was Jack, after having probably disgraced herself by her latest performance, meeting one of the most prominent of the younger men in Wyoming, dressed in an old, discarded riding habit, dusty, her hair blown about her face, looking at least ten years younger than she actually was; in fact, as if she had never left the ranch, never been married or seen anything of the outside world.

As a matter of fact, Frieda now and then felt slightly resentful of the suggestion, occasionally made by strangers, that she was the

older of the two sisters. But this Frieda thought must be because she was getting just the tiniest bit stouter than she would have preferred to be. However, she did not care seriously. This afternoon, as Jack tried to catch her sister's eye, she thought that Frieda looked prettier than usual, in her beautifully made blue cloth tailor suit and the little blue feather hat which made her eyes appear even bluer and the fairness of her skin more conspicuous.

She also considered that Frieda was partly justified in her anger, but that she must not be allowed to display her temper or to lecture her older sister before a stranger.

The next instant, leaning over, Jack whispered a few words to Olive MacDonnell, who with her husband, Captain MacDonnell, was occupying the seat in front of her own. Professor Henry Tilford Russell, Frieda's husband, was next to Jim Colter, who was driving the car.

What Jack whispered was:

"You'll stand by me, Olive, you and Bryan; as usual, I seem to have gotten into more troubled waters than I realized."

And Olive had nodded with the sympathy and understanding which Jack had always

been able to count upon from the days of their earliest acquaintance when Olive had taken refuge at the Rainbow lodge and Jacqueline Ralston had sheltered and protected her.

The following moment Jack stretched out her arms toward Frieda's little girl, who was sitting in her mother's lap.

"Let me hold the baby, please, Frieda dear, you must both be tired."

Then as Peace climbed over into her aunt's lap, Jack pressed her cheek for an instant against the little girl's head.

She and Peace had a deep affection and understanding of each other. But then the child was captivating to everybody. Inheriting Frieda's exquisite blonde coloring, Peace had a spirituality her mother never possessed. She was several years old, but so frail that she seemed younger in spite of her wise, old-fashioned conversation.

"Tired?" she murmured.

Jack shook her head.

"There is nothing the matter." It often troubled her and Frieda, the little girl's curious knowledge of what was going on in the minds of the people about her without an exchange of words.

Frieda now glanced at her sister and her own little girl and her expression altered. She loved seeing them together and had no feeling of jealousy. Indeed she used to hope that some of Jack's vigor, the extraordinary and beautiful vitality which made her different from other persons might be transferred to her own little girl.

"We will leave you at the lodge, Jack, to dress for dinner, if you will come up to the big house later;" Frieda remarked with a change of tone. "Mr. Stevens has been kind enough to say he will remain all night and motor back to Laramie in the morning."

Was it natural vanity on Jacqueline Ralston's part or an effort to reinstate herself in the good graces of her family that she bathed and dressed with unusual care, brushing every particle of dust from her long, heavy, gold brown hair which waved from her temples to the low coil which she wore at the back of her neck?

Jack's evening dress was black chiffon without an ornament or jewel and was the first change she had made from her mourning. To any one less physically perfect than Jacqueline Kent, the severity of the dress might have been trying. But her skin was

clear, her color, without being vivid, gave a sufficient flush to her cheeks, her lips were a deep red, her eyes gray and wide and with a singular sincerity. Moreover, Jack's outdoor tastes, into whatever indiscretions they might lead her, had kept her figure erect, beautifully modeled and well poised, and a beautiful figure is far more rare than a beautiful face.

Walking up with Jimmie as her escort to the big house, Jack confessed to herself that she felt slightly bored. Unexpectedly she had grown a little tired, or if not tired, not in the mood to endure any more family criticism at the present time, and would much have preferred spending the evening alone with her son.

She had confessed her offence to Jimmie, wishing him to hear from her what she had done. But Jimmie, not appreciating the social error she had committed, had appeared immensely proud, even jealous of her prowess, insisting that she should begin to give him lessons in the art of lassoing early the following morning.

Personally Jack wondered just to what extent her family had been unnecessarily critical in their attitude. Would her neigh-

bors judge her action so harshly that it would interfere with their friendliness toward her? It was always hard for Jack to live in an atmosphere of unfriendliness.

So far as her former acquaintance was concerned she had no vestige of doubt. Peter Stevens had been absurdly shocked and offended by her exhibition of what had seemed to him unwomanliness. But personally Jack did not care a great deal for his opinion, she had not liked him particularly, and it had occurred to her that it might be just as well if he were shocked occasionally. He looked prim and too much an old bachelor for so comparatively young a man.

However, what really startled Peter Stevens was Jacqueline Kent's appearance, when he came into the drawing room a few moments before dinner and found her standing alone before a small fire.

He controlled with difficulty an exclamation of surprise, having not thought her even handsome earlier in the afternoon. And he had disapproved of her action more keenly than he believed himself to have revealed. Now as Jack began talking to him he appreciated not only her beauty, but the fact that she had become a charming woman of the

world and probably had seen more of life than he had seen in spite of his success in his profession and his political ambitions.

"You are a Republican, aren't you?" Jack asked, and then added: "I believe you have been elected a member of the State Legislature in Wyoming and the people are talking about you for one of our United States Congressmen. Politics seem to me a great career, perhaps the greatest of all careers, these days, so may I congratulate you?"

Peter Stevens smiled, pleased of course, as any one might have been.

"Perhaps it is a bit premature to talk of my running for Congress, Mrs. Kent, but if I do may I count on your support?"

Laughing, Jack shook her head.

"No, at least I can make no promises. You see, I don't know whether I am a Republican or a Democrat, or what my politics may be until I have been in my own country sufficiently long to study conditions. Maybe my vote will go to a woman candidate, if there happens to be one in my district."

"You don't intend by any chance to be my opponent?"

Smiling over the impossible aspect of his

suggestion but in an unusually pleasant frame of mind, Peter Stevens pushed a large chair over toward the fire so that Jack might sit down. An instant later he drew his own chair up beside her.

"Oh, perhaps I may be your opponent some day, who knows?" Jack returned, accepting the challenge good-naturedly. "But first it might be as well for me to learn whether I am an American citizen. May an American woman who has married a foreigner after the death of her husband assume her former nationality if she so desires?"

"You do desire it, wish to give up your title and all it means in England, and even in the United States for that matter? You will be much admired in any case, I am sure, Mrs. Kent, but after all, Lady Kent has a more romantic sound! You feel sure you will not regret your decision? I have not yet had an opportunity to look up the question you have just asked me and I don't want to answer you without being positive as to the exact law in the matter. My impression is, however, that the choice lies with you; that a woman may resume her former citizenship in the United States if she so wishes and returns to her own country to live."

At this instant Frieda and Professor Russell entered the drawing-room, and a little later, when the rest of the family had joined them, dinner was announced.

Afterwards, although sitting beside each other at dinner, as the conversation was general Peter Stevens had no opportunity for any further personal conversation with Jacqueline Kent.

He was by no means convinced that he liked her. He found most girls and women tiresome after a short acquaintance. However, the girl he had formerly known had at least developed into what appeared to be two conflicting personalities.

CHAPTER V

JEAN, OLIVE AND FRIEDA

ONE afternoon about ten days later Jean Bruce, who was Mrs. Ralph Merritt; Olive, who was Mrs. Bryan MacDonnell; and Frieda Ralston, the wife of the eminent scientist, Professor Henry Tilford Russell, were sitting with their sewing under one of the big trees not far from the big house, built after the discovery of the gold mine on the Rainbow ranch and christened the "Rainbow Castle."

Jack, as was often the case when they were thus quietly engaged, was not with them, but was riding somewhere over the ranch with her son, Jimmie, and Jeannette, one of the four new Ranch girls, to some spot where Jim Colter was apt to be found, in order that he might ride back home with them.

The other little girls were playing at no great distance away, except little Peace, who was sitting in a small chair watching them.

"I do think Jack might have remained at

home with us," Frieda remarked petulantly. "Here I have traveled all the way from Chicago, closed my home for a year, partly of course because the doctors thought it best for Peace to be in the west and outdoors as much as possible, and because Henry needed a change, but also because Jack was to be with us at the old ranch and I had not seen her since Frank's death. And yet nearly every afternoon off she goes riding like a whirlwind and deserting the rest of us as if she cared nothing for our society. Jack has changed a great deal I think, or else is more like she was as a girl than as a married woman, now her husband's influence is removed. I particularly wished her at home this afternoon because, as it is such a perfect afternoon, some of the neighbors are sure to call. After Jack's unfortunate performance the other afternoon I am convinced people are talking about her, so I would like her to make a pleasant personal impression upon some of the best people."

Leaning back in a big wicker chair, Jean Merritt put down her embroidery for a moment.

"Oh, Jack will make a pleasant impression upon some people and not upon others, as

she used to do as a girl and has probably done all her life. Of whatever else one may accuse Jack, no one can say that she has not a forceful personality, so that people either like or dislike her. I often think of the contrast between Jack and me, now we are women, although I presume it was just as conspicuous when we were girls. I create no such affection and no such antagonism as Jack does, but a kind of mild liking or mild admiration as the case may be." Jean laughed, adding:

"I don't know whether I am glad or sorry, whether I envy Jack or feel she should envy me. One thing I am sure of, I should never have turned my back upon the title and position Jack could have continued to hold in England for the simplicity of the old life here at the Rainbow ranch, at least not for any great length of time. I believe I was always a little envious of Jack's opportunities, the very things for which she cared so little. I would like to have been Lady Kent, to have entertained in Kent House, to have been a leader in English society. People talk of Ralph as a successful engineer, but I wonder if they realize this means we have never had a home, and I have simply dragged

myself and the children after him wherever he has been employed. Then, Ralph never has made the money most persons believe he has; as a matter of fact, he is a much more successful engineer than he is a business man. Not that I am intending to complain," Jean said, hastily resuming her work, "but of course one cannot help thinking of how strange life is and how often it gives things to the people who don't wish for them and withholds from those who do. I have wanted to be a prominent society woman all my life and Jack has always had an aversion to such an existence, therefore the opportunity has been hers, not mine."

"Jean, please do not speak in such a pessimistic fashion," Olive interrupted. "The truth is that you have the social gift and Jack, charming and brilliant as she is, has not. Of course I think this is because she does not care to possess it. Jack loved her husband more than the character of life she was obliged to live on his account," Olive continued in the tone which always created a calmer atmosphere in any family discussion. "As for Jack's riding off and leaving us at home, you must try and understand, Frieda dear, that Jack is possessed of infi-

nitely greater energy than the rest of us, and that all her days when she has been troubled she has not kept still and brooded as most girls and women do. At present, in spite of what she has been through, she remains cheerful and agreeable whenever she is with us, and when she is unhappy tries to wear herself out with physical exercise. I wonder if any one of us would be as courageous in her present circumstances? As for what Jack did the other afternoon, Frieda, of course you know I agree with you that it was indiscreet of her, but suppose we do not mention the fact any more."

Frieda's red lips closed in a finer line than one might have expected of her dimpled countenance.

"One is obliged to continue to mention one's attitude on such matters to Jack, else she forgets and does again exactly what she likes regardless of consequences," Frieda replied with primness. "But of course, Olive, I appreciate that you have never found any fault in Jack for as long as you have known each other. I wonder sometimes how your husband feels, except that he has pretty much the same point of view. But I have not been disagreeable to Jack over her

latest escapade except because of its possible effect upon her. I am sure you understand this, Jean, if Olive does not. Jack is planning to live in this neighborhood for a number of years, until Jimmie should be taken home to England, therefore it is most important that she should have a good reputation among our neighbors and friends. I am sure I love Jack better than either of you can, as she is my own sister. Even she realizes that it is for her sake that I have been so annoyed."

"Certainly, Frieda," Jean Merritt returned soothingly, having always had more influence upon the youngest of the original four Ranch girls than the others even in their girlhood, "Olive does understand your attitude and has said she agreed with you. But I also agree with Olive that we must not scold Jack any more for this particular offence. I have never seen Jim Colter so displeased with Jack before. After all, it was nothing more than an indiscretion, which my wretch of a husband refuses to take seriously and declares was rather sporting of Jack. He insists Jack is one of the few persons in the world who dares to do what she wishes when there is no harm in it and therefore other people must come round to her way of think-

ing in the end. Now, if there is gossip, Frieda, don't you think it might be wiser to have Jack's family take the position that she has done nothing so extraordinary? Goodness, is that one of our formidable neighbors approaching? Shall we go indoors to enjoy her visit? I agree with you, Frieda, I wish Jack *had* stayed at home this afternoon. If she could have made a friend of Mrs. Senator Marshall half the battle in this neighborhood would have been won. At least we shall be able to find if what we have been fearing has come true. If I remember the lady at all well, if she has been told of Jack's indiscretion, we are sure to learn of it."

Before Jean had finished speaking she had arisen, laid her work aside and was moving graciously forward to greet a woman who was driving up the avenue toward the house.

She was driving a new electric machine beautifully upholstered in a bright blue. Mrs. Marshall was herself dressed in a costume of almost the same color, and was rather stout with a mass of sandy colored hair turning gray, and a florid complexion. She was the second wife of a United States senator,

"No, I should of course prefer to remain

out of doors. You do look too comfortable and delightful," she began in a manner which was perhaps a little too cordial to be perfectly sincere. Then when she had shaken hands with Frieda and Olive, she murmured: "So Lady Kent is not at home. I am so sorry. You will understand if I say my visit is made especially to her, as I hear she intends remaining among us for the present. But there, I had forgotten. I was not to say Lady Kent, so my stepson informed me. Strange for an American woman voluntarily to resign a title! I am so little of the time in Wyoming and so much of the time in Washington perhaps I fail to understand Mrs. Kent's more western point of view. But as we are to be in Wyoming for some time now, in fact until my husband is renominated and I presume re-elected to the Senate, he was anxious I should meet Mrs. Kent, whom I believe he knew as a girl."

"You are very kind," Frieda murmured. "I am sure my sister will be disappointed at not seeing you and will look forward to the pleasure a little later. Indeed, I hope she may return before you leave."

But whatever Frieda's tone and manner, she was not so convinced that her sister Jack

would enjoy the acquaintance of their present visitor. Mrs. Marshall was as unlike Jack as one could well imagine two persons being. She had the reputation for being both a gossip and a snob and yet a woman of whom for these very reasons a number of persons were afraid. Personally Frieda felt a little afraid herself and preferred that she should be their friend rather than enemy.

"Your sister seems to spend a great deal of her time on horseback since her arrival in the neighborhood," Mrs. Marshall remarked in a casual fashion. Nevertheless both Frieda and Olive experienced slight sensations of discomfort, wishing that Jean Merritt, who was better able to answer their guest, had not disappeared at this moment to ask one of the maids to serve tea.

"Yes, my sister has been devoted to horseback riding all her life," Frieda answered a little too warmly. "She rode always as a girl and never gave up riding after marrying and living in England."

"Yet she must have ridden in a very different fashion. One can scarcely imagine an English lady riding with a lot of cowboys and ranchmen and engaging in a lassoing contest with no other women present. My husband

and I were much amused when we heard the story. Mrs. Kent is known to be such a western enthusiast there is a report that she may be intending to enter a wild west show. However, I believe the commonest report of the story is that Mrs. Kent is thinking of joining the movies. Well, it is the most popular thing one can do these days!" And the older woman laughed as if she only half believed her own suggestions. Nevertheless, she could hardly have failed to realize that neither of her companions were enjoying her remarks.

Frieda had flushed until her big blue eyes were half full of tears which she was doing her best to restrain. Her voice shook during her reply, yet she also endeavored to summon a smile.

"One is so glad to find something or some one to talk about in a small community, isn't one?" she returned. "I should have supposed you would have lost interest in gossip yourself, Mrs. Marshall, living so much of your time in a city like Washington," Frieda added. "Of course you must know personally that my sister is not interested in any of the picturesque suggestions you seem to have had brought to your attention.

As a matter of fact, she has not yet entirely given up wearing mourning. She has a rather large fortune and later must find some way of interesting herself, although at present she appears content merely with her own family. Yet I am sure after a time people must realize what her coming into a community like this one may mean."

Then realizing that she was not making the situation any better, and that their visitor was annoyed by the suggestion she had intended to convey, that her sister, Mrs. Kent, might become a more important person in the neighborhood than Mrs. Marshall herself, Frieda grew suddenly silent. After all, why was Jack not at home to explain her own eccentricity?

Now as Olive entered the conversation Frieda experienced a sensation of relief. Olive's manner was so gentle and quiet one was seldom antagonized by it.

"We are *so* glad of what you have just told us, Mrs. Marshall," she began. "I confess we have been interested to know whether Mrs. Kent's action the other afternoon was of sufficient importance to interest her neighbors and what story had been told concerning it. Mrs. Marshall, I am sure, will be glad

to hear what actually took place and tell other people the exact truth. You are quite right; Mrs. Kent did ride over with several of our ranchmen to watch a lassoing contest among the cowboys. She used to take a deep interest in all western sports as a girl and never has lost her interest apparently. Then I confess, to our regret, Mrs. Kent did try to discover if she had forgotten her old-time skill with a lasso. We were frightened, as she might so easily have been injured. But nothing of the kind occurred and there is no more to the story. Mrs. Kent will be sorry to disappoint her neighbors if they have imagined a more interesting set of circumstances."

Returning at this instant, followed by a maid with tea, the conversation altered. A short time after, without any further reference to Jacqueline Kent except to repeat that she was sorry to have missed her, the visitor withdrew.

However, the three former Ranch girls did not immediately go indoors. It was still not five o'clock in the afternoon of a beautiful late September day. Beyond the broad fields of wheat and oats were golden and ripe for harvesting. Nearby the new little Ranch

girls were still at play, spinning around in a gay circle at the game of "drop the handkerchief," little Peace in her chair looking on.

"It is just as I feared, Jack is going to be the talk of the neighborhood before any one has even seen her or been introduced to her. I presume the cowboys discuss her skill around their camp fires at night as well as our richer neighbors; Mrs. Marshall probably spared us as much of the gossip as possible," Frieda declared irritably.

But at this instant glancing up, she saw the figure of a woman on horseback outlined against the blue horizon and at the same instant Jack waved to her and came cantering in their direction.

No one, except an extremely stupid or self-absorbed person, ever beheld Jacqueline Kent on horseback without a distinct sensation of pleasure.

Frieda, in spite of the many times she had seen her in such a position, was not proof against the fascination. "How wonderfully Jack rides! No wonder she loves it," she exclaimed. "I am glad she is at home at last!"

A few moments after, having cleared the gate of the farther field without descending to open it, Jack rode swiftly up the avenue.

The eyes of Frieda, Olive and Jean remained fastened upon her.

Having added to the disapproval of her family by being seen in an old and discarded riding habit upon the afternoon of her unfortunate adventure, Jack had since appeared only in an extremely new and smart riding costume made for her by her London tailor shortly before sailing for the United States. It was of black cloth with a close fitting coat and riding trousers. This afternoon she also wore black riding boots of soft leather and a little derby hat. Her hair in the yellow afternoon light was much the same color as the ripened wheat.

So intent was the small audience upon watching Jack's return and so intent were the new little Ranch girls upon their game, that no one saw a small figure rise suddenly from her chair, clap her hands together and then dart across the little space of grass toward the rapidly galloping horse. A moment later, and she was directly in the horse's path, not three feet away.

There the baby stood stock still, her little white frock fluttering in the wind, her yellow curls flying, her face upturned, frightened now and quite still. The horse seemed to rear

so high above her head that she caught no vision of the loved figure she had run forward to greet.

Her mother saw her, and Olive and Jean, and they were not many yards away, and also the other children, who suddenly had quit their play and remained standing in a long line, still holding one another's hands, breathless, intent, terrified, unable in the surprise and terror of the moment to offer aid.

"Baby!" Frieda called and darted forward, yet knowing instinctively she could not be in time. Olive and Jean would have run after her except for a swift call from Jack.

They saw Jack hold her bridle easily in one hand, and then lean over from her saddle until her arm could sweep the ground, when with a single swift motion she lifted little Peace into the saddle, as she drew her horse to a standstill.

"Don't frighten Peace, please, Frieda," she said, as she gave the little girl safe and smiling and pleased with her adventure into Frieda's outstretched arms.

"And to think, Jack dear," Frieda murmured, still tearful half an hour afterwards

WITH A SINGLE SWIFT MOTION SHE LIFTED LITTLE PEACE INTO THE SADDLE

although Peace was safe in bed, "that I sometimes have criticized you for keeping on with your riding when you might be doing such stupid indoor things as Jean and Olive and I enjoy. Had you been one of us, why, Peace might have been killed or worse this afternoon. I never saw any one do anything so quickly or so skilfully, Jack, as you lifted little Peace out of danger. Why, I—I had forgotten that you used to be able long ago to lean from your horse and pick up anything you wished from the ground. One would not have supposed that such an accomplishment could be so valuable as actually to save my baby's life. Say you forgive me for being so hateful about that other thing for the past ten days."

Jack's arm was about her sister as they walked up and down before the house waiting for Professor Russell's return from the small hut situated about a mile away where he spent the greater part of each day engaged in scientific investigations.

"But, Frieda dear, I was to blame and I am sorry," Jack replied. "Jim has not forgiven me yet. I was to blame this afternoon too, for I should not have ridden up to the house so swiftly when I knew the

children were playing near. But I grew suddenly lonely for you and Olive and Jean and left Jimmie and Jeannette with Jim and rode quickly home to find you. Here comes your husband, I'll leave you and go home to the lodge. No, I don't want any one to come with me and I won't see you again this evening. Good-night."

CHAPTER VI

JEAN AND RALPH MERRITT

THE marriage between Jean Bruce, the cousin of Frieda and Jacqueline Ralston and one of the four original Ranch girls, and Ralph Merritt, the young engineer of the Rainbow mine, had only taken place after a long and frequently interrupted friendship, since between them there were many differences of opinion, of taste and of ideals.

Frankly as a young girl Jean always had cared greatly for wealth, for social position and for fashionable people, a viewpoint which had not altered with the years, as Jean freely announced.

True that her husband had made a reputation for himself as an expert mining engineer and at different times in a small way had shared in the profits of the enterprises which his skill and ability had made valuable to the owners. Yet never at any time had Ralph Merritt acquired a large fortune for himself and his family. Notwithstanding

his many fine traits of character he suffered from one weakness. In his effort to gratify and please his wife now and then he had speculated with Jean's private fortune and with his own, and although never confessing the fact, his speculations more often than not had been unsuccessful.

In returning to the old Rainbow ranch to spend a few months, Jean and Ralph had been glad to say that the opportunity to be reunited for a short time with their old friends and former associations was not to be resisted. However, there was another motive, if they preferred not to speak of it. At the time of Jacqueline Kent's homecoming from England to the ranch after the death of her husband, Jean and Ralph were passing through a period of financial stress so that the visit to the big house with their two little girls would be a relief as well as a pleasure. There was a chance ahead, in which Ralph Merritt thoroughly believed, sure to put him on his feet again. Like most other patriotic Americans, at the outbreak of the war in Europe he had volunteered for service overseas and been captain in a mining corps in France. Returning home, if he were rich in experience, he was poor in worldly goods.

There was nothing unusual in this, but unfortunately Jean and Ralph were not willing to begin over again by living simply and economically until Ralph could make new business connections. And the fault was actually more Jean's than her husband's, although she was not aware of the fact. Nevertheless, among the four Ranch girls, Jean, who loved money more than any one of them, was the only one without it. Naturally the war and the high taxes it entailed had decreased the value of the English estate which Jacqueline Ralston Kent had inherited from her husband, yet the estate was still large enough for Jack and her son to be entirely comfortable apart from her own private fortune, due to her share of the output of the Rainbow mine, which had been wisely and conservatively invested. Moreover, Jack's own tastes were simple and she wished to bring up her son in a simple fashion.

Captain MacDonnell possessed only a small estate of his own, but Olive had inherited wealth from the grandmother who had appeared so mysteriously in her life during the year spent by "The Ranch Girls at Boarding School." Moreover, Captain MacDonnell and Olive apparently cared only for each

other, for Captain MacDonnell's art, and the effort to forget his injury in the war in his new work and life. The truth was that a large part of her fortune Olive had devoted to the establishment and upkeep of an Indian school not far from the neighborhood of the Rainbow ranch. She and her husband preferred to live out of doors in a tent in the western country whenever the weather made it possible, partly because of Captain MacDonnell's health and also that he might constantly study the western types and scenes which he was painting to the exclusion of all other subjects.

Frieda and her husband, Professor Henry Tilford Russell, were not rich; in fact, Professor Russell, having resigned his professorship at the University of Chicago, was at present making no income. Yet his parents were wealthy and adored Frieda and her little girl, and moreover, Professor Russell was at this time engaging in scientific experiments which might bring him fame and fortune or else achieve no result of importance. An expert chemist who had made several valuable discoveries during the war, Professor Russell believed that he had earned a year's holiday at the ranch and the

opportunity to indulge in one or two of his private hobbies. So Jim Colter had offered him one of his small unused ranch houses in a comparatively isolated spot where the Professor could conduct his experiments with danger only to himself.

Frieda worried over this possibility, but in the main allowed her Professor husband to have his way, having found out that without his work he was restless and miserable. There was a new Frieda in her relation to her husband following their disagreement and reconciliation told in "The Ranch Girls and Their Great Adventure," and the birth of their little girl. Now Frieda seemed to care only for her husband and child, and had become an almost too punctilious married woman and housekeeper in that she wished everyone else to conform to her ideas.

Money problems therefore did not at this time trouble Frieda, whose interest was concentrated in her little girl's health and in her husband's success, not for any possible wealth it might bring them, but that he might enjoy the honors Frieda felt so sure he deserved. In the meantime she had her own income and knew that at any moment

Henry's mother and father were more than anxious to supply any of their wishes or needs.

So it was a little cruel that Jean, who cared so much for money, was the only one of the Ranch girls to endure not alone the pinch of a present poverty but a painful uncertainty with regard to the future. In fact, during the weeks of the reunion of the Rainbow Ranch Girls, Jean Merritt had been under a good deal more of a strain than the others dreamed, for, except for her few general remarks to Olive and Frieda, she had made no mention of her anxieties.

Ralph Merritt had accompanied his wife and little girls to the ranch and remained with them a few days. Afterwards he had gone away, announcing that he had important business which must be looked into, but that he might come back at any time. There was nothing exceptional in this, as Ralph's interests had always required that he move about from place to place, seeing a number of men who oftentimes wished him to look at a mine before agreeing to undertake the engineering work in connection with it. At present among the interests that called Ralph away was the discovery of a gold mine concerning which his advice was desired.

Ralph Merritt was a decided favorite with Jim Colter, the former manager of the Rainbow ranch and one of its present owners. Among the husbands of the four Ranch girls he always had liked Ralph best. But even he had not suspected that Ralph was in any difficulty, since the younger man had said nothing which might cause one to suspect the fact.

One day, about a week after the visit from Mrs. Marshall, a note arrived asking that the former Ranch girls drive over to her home and have tea with her and a few of their neighbors.

At first Jack insisted upon declining the invitation, saying that she had not been out of mourning for any length of time and felt a hesitancy in meeting strangers. But Frieda protested, declaring her sister must accept or appear unfriendly. Mrs. Marshall had stated that her other guests would be neighbors, some of whom Jack had known as a girl, and the others she should learn to know as she contemplated living at the ranch. So Jack had yielded as she ordinarily did to Frieda in all small matters, in a way trusting Frieda's judgment rather than her own, besides not wishing to appear selfish.

Without the subject being mentioned between them again, Jack understood that her sister wished her to counteract if possible a former unfortunate impression.

But Jean Merritt's refusal of the invitation was more unexpected and more determined, as usually Jean welcomed every social opportunity. However, she had a much better excuse to offer than Jack. She announced that she had received a letter from her husband saying that he might be expected to reach the ranch some time during the afternoon chosen by Mrs. Marshal, for her tea party and so there was no question but that Jean must not be argued into leaving home if she preferred to remain rather than run the risk of not being able to greet her husband upon his arrival.

Apparently in her usual state of mind, Jean helped the other girls to dress, talking to Frieda about a number of casual subjects and walking half way toward the lodge to meet Jack, who came up to the big house a little earlier than the hour for starting. Senator and Mrs. Marshall's summer home was only a few miles away in the direction of the city of Laramie.

After the others had gone and Jean was

alone in her own room, her nervousness began to reveal itself first in a number of small ways. Restlessly she walked up and down her large and beautiful bedroom, which had been especially designed for her as a girl when Rainbow Castle was built after the discovery of the gold mine and before the marriage of any one of the four Ranch girls. The room was upholstered in rose, Jean's favorite color, with cretonne hangings of rose and white and a low couch by the window filled with cushions of the same material. The rooms set apart for Frieda, Olive and Jack in the big house were kept as nearly as possible as they had been arranged in the old days and Frieda was at present occupying her own apartment. But Jack had never loved the new place as she had the Rainbow lodge of the days before their fortune, and moreover preferred her own private establishment. Olive and Captain MacDonnell chose to enjoy more freedom and seclusion in their tent than had they lived with the rest of the family.

This afternoon Jean for a time made no pretense of sitting down. When the motor had disappeared down the avenue of cottonwood trees she continued to walk up and

down, now and then glancing out her open window. Ralph had written that no one was to attempt making an effort to meet him, as he was uncertain upon what train he would arrive. He would either find some one to drive him over to the house or else telephone.

Jean had not dressed since lunch, yet her costume chanced to be a pretty brown skirt and a cream voile blouse, open at the throat and rather unusually becoming.

However, in the midst of her restless movement, stopping for an instant, she gazed at herself in the mirror with distinct disfavor.

"I am afraid I am losing the small claim I once had to good looks," she announced to herself with a frown of disapproval. "Certainly I am the least good looking of the four of us! I wonder if Jack is the beauty these days or Olive? Frieda is pretty, but she has not the air or the distinction of Jack, or Olive's rare coloring. Oh, well, I suppose I ought not to mind except for Ralph's sake! Yet if Ralph only brings home the good news I expect him to bring, I know I shall become a more attractive person! Sometimes I am afraid I have made things harder than I intended, yet Ralph knew my weakness

before we married. He understood that I cared more for worldly things than I suppose one should. Oh, at the time we were engaged perhaps I did seem to care less for them and to think only of our life together, but one can't always live up to the best in one. Now I do intend to be more loving and considerate."

Rapidly Jean began changing her simple costume for an afternoon dress, a rose-colored crêpe de chine, by no means new, but one which her husband especially liked. And as Jean dressed, in spite of the fact that pallor was usual with her, a warm, cream-colored pallor extraordinarily attractive with her dark-brown hair and eyes, this afternoon her cheeks flushed to a deep rose. At the same time her eyes turned from the mirror to the window, hoping she might see her husband driving toward the house. Her ears also were listening for the sound of a telephone which might announce the fact that Ralph was at the station waiting to be sent for. She had decided not to drive over to meet him herself, as she would prefer to hear the news he must bring when they were alone.

It could not be possible that the news would be bad news! Jean put this idea

away from her at once. This could not be! Ralph had been so sure of the new gold mine in which he had lately invested almost everything they possessed. Perhaps he should not have made the investment before examining the mine himself, yet he had not been able to wait. The owners had insisted that he must take the same chance along with them or they would find some one else to make the investment. If the new mine was what they hoped and believed, large fortunes would accrue to them all; if not Ralph Merritt must share the fortunes of war.

The afternoon passed, yet Jean continued to await in vain the appearance of her husband or the sound of the telephone. Not once did it ring during the long hours. Four o'clock and then five and still no Ralph. "After all, it would have been wiser to have gone with the others to Mrs. Marshall's tea, as it would have been far more interesting, and she would have felt less nervous than waiting alone," Jean concluded.

Then by and by, woman like, Jean began feeling aggrieved. If Ralph were unable to return home as he had anticipated why had he not telegraphed? Surely he must appreciate her anxiety!

Picking up a magazine, Jean dropped down upon the couch by the window, attempting to read. At first she found it impossible to concentrate her attention, but later became fairly interested.

A quarter of an hour after, her door opening abruptly, Jean looked up with a quick exclamation.

"Ralph!"

"What's the trouble, Jean?" Ralph Merritt demanded with an irritation in his voice and manner most unusual with him, "I have been trying to telephone the house for the past two hours and finally gave up and have walked over from the station—three or four miles, isn't it? It felt like ten. Seems as if some one might have been interested enough to answer the telephone, especially as I wrote you I'd try to get the house in case I could not find any one to drive me."

"But, Ralph, the telephone has not rung, I have been listening and expecting to hear it all afternoon. The connection must be broken. Yet what does it matter, now you are at home? What is the news?"

"Matter is that I am dead tired," Ralph Merritt answered, flinging himself down upon the couch Jean had just vacated. His

shoes were covered with dust, his face and hands were soiled, his clothes rumpled. In a flash Jean thought of the Ralph who had returned to the ranch in this same condition a number of years before and of their interview together on the porch of the Rainbow lodge. Ralph had promised her then never to speculate again, never to risk his hard earned money in a gamble, which is all that speculation is. Then Jean put the memory quickly away from her, as there could be no reason to recall it upon this occasion.

She was standing looking down upon her husband.

"Tell me quickly, Ralph, things are all right; they must be," she argued, her voice hoarse, her eyes having a peculiar hard brightness unlike their usual velvety softness.

"Think I would not already have told you, Jean, if they were?" Ralph Merritt answered. "Suppose I would have spoken first of being tired, although I am tired straight through, if things had worked out as we hoped? The new mine is not worth the money it has required to buy the machinery. It is my fault. I should have known better and taken more time to consider and investigate.

I was suffering from the same trouble that's taken hold of a good many young American fellows these days, trying to get rich in too great a hurry. I am sorry, chiefly for your sake, Jean dear, and the little girls, but more for you because the little girls won't mind seriously. I'll be able to make a living all right, but for a while I'm afraid not a big one, and these are hard times to make money go very far. I have an offer to go into New Mexico and look over another mine, and if it's any good I am to have the job of engineer."

Ralph was now sitting up, his look of fatigue and discouragement a little less apparent as he continued to talk. He was a splendid looking young fellow, a typical American with a fine, clear-cut face, a strong nose and a sensitive mouth. The eyes he turned toward Jean were wistful at this moment.

But Jean was white with disappointment and anger.

"The old story with you, Ralph, always something in the future, nothing for the present. I trust you are not expecting the little girls and me to go with you on your wild goose chase into New Mexico. I suppose when I tell Jim Colter and Jack that we have

not a cent to live upon, they will allow us to remain at the ranch for a time anyhow. If I were only as clever as Jack perhaps I might be able to support the family without your help. I have little faith left in you."

CHAPTER VII

THE TEA PARTY

"JACK, you will try to make yourself as agreeable as possible." Jacqueline Kent laughed: "Frieda dear, don't I always try? And is it fair of you to blame me when I am unsuccessful? But I know you want me to be as staid and well behaved this afternoon as if I were the Dowager Lady Kent, in order to conquer the reputation I seem already to have acquired in the neighorhhood. Do they think me a kind of wild west show? Well, I will make my best effort."

The motor in which Olive, Frieda and Jack were driving had by this time entered the grounds of the summer home of Senator and Mrs. Marshall. The house was a big frame building with a wide porch filled with attractive porch furniture and shaded by striped awnings of brown and yellow. The afternoon was a warm and lovely one and apparently the guests were preferring to remain out of doors, as several of them were

wandering about in the yard before the house and a number were seated upon the veranda.

As the motor from the Rainbow ranch stopped, Senator Marshall himself, accompanied by Peter Stevens, came forward to greet the newcomers. He spoke cordially of his pleasure in seeing them to Frieda and Olive, but his attention was attracted by Jacqueline Ralston Kent, whom he had known as a young girl.

Senator Marshall was a middle-aged man of distinguished appearance, over six feet tall, with white hair, bright blue eyes and an aquiline nose. Ordinarily his expression was one of good-humored tolerance. Yet Senator Marshall had the reputation for being a dangerous enemy and a man of strong will whom no one dared oppose upon a matter of importance. Notwithstanding the fact that his wife was feared by her neighbors as a woman whose authority no one was allowed to dispute, it was said that, although her husband gave way to her in all small issues, in larger ones she was compelled to do as he wished.

To-day Jack was wearing an afternoon dress of black tulle over black silk, and a large black hat, which made her skin appear

exceptionally clear and fair and her hair a deeper gold brown.

"It was kind of you to come to see us the other afternoon, Mrs. Marshall, and I am sorry to have missed you," Jack said a little shyly a few moments later, when Senator Marshall had taken her to speak to his wife, leaving Peter Stevens to follow with Frieda and Olive. It was a misfortune from which Jacqueline Ralston had suffered as a girl and which she never had entirely conquered, that she was apt to feel less at ease with women than with men, as if they understood her less well and criticized her more severely.

Now as Mrs. Marshall returned her greeting, although perfectly polite and cordial, Jack had an instinctive impression that the older woman saw something in her which she did not like, or else had heard something previously which had prejudiced her.

"I am glad to meet you at last, Mrs. Kent. Considering the fact that you have been in the neighborhood so short a time I seem already to have *heard* a great deal of you."

If there was no double meaning in the words which were simple in themselves, nevertheless Jack flushed slightly.

"But I am not a stranger in this neighbor-

hood, Mrs. Marshall. I knew your husband a long time ago when my father was alive and I was a little girl trying to help manage our ranch. I don't think I forgave you for many years, Senator Marshall, because you were one of the lawyers on the other side when we had a difficulty over the boundary line of our ranch."

"No, you were quite right not to forgive me, but remember you won the case and I lost, so that should make it easier for you to forgive and forget. I am sure I shall never have the bad taste or the poor judgment to take sides against you a second time upon any subject."

Smiling, Jack glanced around her. Seated upon the porch were half a dozen or more persons whose faces were dimly familiar, some of whom she had not seen in a number of years, others fairly intimate friends, and a few complete strangers.

Leading her about the circle, Mrs. Marshall introduced her to the persons whom she had never met and Jack herself paused to shake hands and talk to the others.

There was something in her manner which the older woman observed with a sensation of envy, never having seen anyone before

apparently so sincere and straightforward as Jacqueline Kent.

An hour later Jack found herself at one end of the long veranda surrounded by a group of half a dozen persons including her host.

"It is growing late, I am afraid we shall soon have to say farewell," Jack suggested, looking about to discover Frieda and Olive. She had done her best to make herself appear as agreeable as possible according to her sister's direction, but already she was a little tired and anxious to be back at the ranch, seldom really enjoying conventional society as she believed she should.

"But you must not think of leaving us, Mrs. Kent, until you have seen my son," Senator Marshall insisted. "He was forced to go to Laramie this afternoon upon some business for me, but I promised to keep you until his return. I suppose you don't realize that the girls in the neighborhood are already beginning to be a little jealous of you, now that you have the reputation of being the best horsewoman in the state. I am glad you are not a young man instead of a young woman, or you might become Stevens' or my political rival some day. Do I hear

correctly that you mean to resume your American nationality as soon as you can go through the necessary formalities?"

Jack nodded.

"Yes, Mr. Stevens has been helping me, telling me what I must do. Yet I think it is not gallant of you, Senator, to suggest a woman has no chance in politics in Wyoming, the first state in the Union to allow women the vote."

Senator Marshall leaned back in his chair, eyeing Jack with a smile.

"So you are thinking of playing Lady Nancy Astor in the United States? Who knows but the idea is a good one. If the British Parliament accepted an American woman married to a British peer, I don't see why an American woman married to an Englishman, resuming her former allegiance to her own country because she loves it best, would not make a first-class member of Congress, perhaps defeat you, Stevens."

"Why not you, Senator, if Mrs. Kent is elected to office from Wyoming? For that matter, I do not see why she should not have the highest honor in the gift of the state."

As the two men were joking with one another, Jack rose and at the same instant saw

a young man of about twenty-one coming hurriedly across the porch in their direction.

She held out her hand at once, recognizing him as John Marshall, Senator Marshall's son, although never having met him at any time.

"I am so glad you have not run away, Mrs. Kent, I want to ask you a great favor. I hear you can beat any ranchman in Wyoming swinging a lasso. Try it with me some day, won't you? It is great sport, but I've yet to see a girl outside the circus or a wild west show who is any good at it."

Absurd under the circumstances, yet Jack blushed furiously and then laughed:

"Am I never, never to cease to hear of my ridiculous exploit? You see, Mr. Marshall, I thought I was safe from observation that day, or perhaps it is more than probable I did not think what I was doing at all. And since that ten minutes of simply having a good time and trying to find out if I had forgotten what I learned as a girl, I have heard of little else. But you are mistaken in thinking I have any great skill with a lasso. I have forgotten the little skill I once possessed."

"But you will let me see you attempt it

again? It is the greatest sport in the world, beats tennis or baseball, or even polo. The girls in this part of the country are either afraid or else insist lassoing isn't ladylike or proper, some funny nonsense! A good many of them say it was shocking of you and that no well-bred girl would ever have been alone with a lot of cowboys watching their contest, let alone taking part. But I——"

"See here, don't you think you have said enough, John?" Senator Marshall protested.

But Jack only laughed and held out her hand.

"I deserve nearly anything that may be said of me, but I thought I had come home to live in the west where one did not have to be conventional. Apologize for me, won't you? Yes, I'll ride with you with pleasure if you don't mind my bringing Jimmie and several little girls along to act as our escort. You see, I ordinarily ride with them every afternoon. I do wish we could try the lassoing, but I am afraid I don't dare."

"Still, you will some day. I've an idea you would dare anything that you thought the right thing to do," John Marshall added so enthusiastically and making so little effort

to conceal his admiration for Jacqueline Kent, who was several years his senior, that the group of older people about them laughed.

A few moments later, thrusting his father and Peter Stevens aside, he insisted upon seeing Jack to the motor and handed her in with amusing and most unnecessary gallantry, as she was more than able to look after herself.

Ten minutes later, leaning back in the car with her eyes closed, Jack demanded:

"Were you pleased with me this afternoon, Frieda Ralston Russell? Goodness knows, I am tired enough with the struggle to be agreeable! I wonder why society wears me out and I can be outdoors and busy all day without fatigue."

"You got on pretty well, Jack, only I was not with you all of the time and don't know everything you said. I do hope you said nothing indiscreet; but I am afraid Senator Marshall and his son liked you better than Mrs. Marshall did, and that is a pity."

Jack yawned.

"Olive, was there ever so much worldly wisdom possessed by any one person as by Mrs. Henry Tilford Russell? I am sorry if you think Mrs. Marshall did not like me,

but she cannot be blamed for the fact and neither can I. As for the son, John Marshall, he is a nice boy, nicer than his father. I don't know why, but I never altogether trust Senator Marshall. However, I am talking nonsense; one talks so much nonsense at a tea party it is hard to stop immediately after. I hope Ralph is safely at home by this time. I was sorry Jean was not with us. It is so wonderful for the four Rainbow Ranch girls to be living together at the old ranch after all these years and all our experiences that I don't like our being parted except when it is unavoidable."

"Don't talk as if we were patriarchs, Jack, and as if John Marshall were a small boy and you were old enough to be his mother," Frieda protested. "You are only a few years older than he is, after all! But it is nice to be together and I trust Ralph's arrival will cheer Jean up. She has tried not to show it, but Jean and I always have understood each other and I have seen lately that she is more worried over something than she wants anyone to know."

"Well, please give my love to Ralph if he has returned and say I shall look forward to seeing him in the morning. No, I won't

come to the house. Jimmie and I want to have dinner together and an evening alone," Jack answered.

About ten o'clock she was sitting out on the porch of the Rainbow lodge feasting her eyes on the golden glory of the October moon floating in a heaven of the deepest blue, when she heard some one walking toward the house.

Jack was rarely afraid of the conventional things which most women fear, yet the steps seemed furtive and uncertain, so that she got up hastily.

A moment later the figure of a young fellow appeared wearing the costume of a cowboy. The moonlight shone full upon his face, yet Jack did not at once recognize him.

" 'Pears as if ye didn't know me, yet I ain't surprised," he drawled. "I ain't seen you but the once when we rid over to the lassoing from the ranch house. My name's Billy Preston, come from the Kentucky mountains. The boys sent me up here to make you a little present. I was going to leave it on your front porch and sneak away again, expectin' to find you indoors or mebbe not at home."

"Why a present for me? What is it?

No one ever gives me a present any more, and who is it from?" Jack demanded as eagerly as a little girl.

The young mountaineer thrust something toward her, rather a large bundle it appeared in the moonlight.

"It's a new lasso, made of the finest horsehair in the market and sent you by the fellers who saw you ride that time. They say with a little more practice you'll learn what you set out to do. Anyhow, the fellers want me to say they are with you in anything you may be thinkin' about undertakin' out in these here parts. And say, you needn't be afraid, no matter what happens. We are all your friends; we like a woman who don't put on side and who kin ride straight and think straight and act straight. You know, I was brought up in the Kentucky mountains, and besides I fit two years in France. So I kin shoot, as we used to say down south, I kin shoot a fly off a telegraph pole, so if ever you should need any one to look after you, why, count on me."

"Good gracious, thank you and thank everybody!" Jack murmured. "I am delighted to own the new lasso, although I'm afraid I shall never learn to use it properly.

But if the Rainbow ranchmen wish me to know they are glad I am at home again, I don't know how to thank them enough. Please say I love every inch of this old ranch in the greatest country in the world. But I'm not thinking of any special undertaking except to live here and help a little with the care of the ranch as I once did as a girl. Just the same, I am deeply grateful for the honor you have paid me and the protection I feel sure every one of you would offer me if I should ever need it. I don't know what I should say to express my gratitude, but you'll see that the men understand."

Billy Preston nodded.

"Don't you worry, Miss—Mam," he added quickly. Yet he must be forgiven his mistake for Jack looked so like a young girl standing there on the old porch in her soft black dress in the yellow radiance of the moon. "I'll see they know you're pleased, but you ain't to disremember the rest of what I said. One ain't ever able to guess how things may turn out in this world or what troubles folks may git into."

CHAPTER VIII

AN INTERVIEW

IMMEDIATELY following breakfast the next morning Jack and Jimmie went out to the tennis court near the Rainbow lodge, which they had recently been trying to get into condition. There they began batting balls back and forth across the net. Not old enough to play a good game of tennis for the present, nevertheless Jimmie Kent was determined to make as good a beginning as possible and to learn whatever his mother might be able to teach him. He was very like Jack rather than his English relatives, a straightforward, determined little fellow, self-willed and frank, with a vigorous body and an ardent love of outdoor sports.

"You've missed that ball and it was such an easy one!" he called out in an annoyed tone, and then saw his mother run across the court waving her racquet.

"Excuse me for the present, Jimmie, but here comes Frieda from the big house and it

is so early for her to be out that I am afraid there is something the matter."

Frieda Russell was walking a little more rapidly than usual and seemed to be slightly out of breath when her sister joined her and slipped an arm through hers.

"Nothing has happened, Frieda? Peace is all right, and Professor Russell and the others?"

The younger woman nodded and yet her face remained grave and there was a suggestion of a frown between her large clear blue eyes.

"Yes and no, Jack, Oh, I know you hate any one to speak in so non-committal a fashion and yet one can not always be so direct and so certain about things as you are. Everybody is well at the big house, physically well I mean, and yet there is something I felt I wanted to discuss with you this morning before any one else sees you. I particularly want to talk to you alone, so suppose we sit down in the hammock on the front porch and you can see and tell me if any one draws near."

A moment later, Frieda spread out her plaid blue gingham skirt with as much care as if it had been of silk and took off her big

blue shade hat, holding it in her lap. She had always been extremely careful of her costume and her physical appearance as a young girl and now devoted even more attention to them, with the result that she had an air of daintiness which was very pleasing and that her skin remained as fair and soft as a baby's.

"You are rather a comfort, you know, Jack, when one is in a difficulty, not that I always rely upon your judgment, but I do like to talk things over with you and get your point of view," she began. "The truth is I am worried about Jean and Ralph. Ralph returned to the ranch late yesterday afternoon and saw Jean while we were away. I did not see either of them until later when they came in to dinner together and then I have never seen Ralph or Jean look as they did. Even Henry noticed it, and you know he notices very little that has to do with human beings. He actually inquired if they were feeling ill, which was most unfortunate, since they both said 'no,' and then tried to behave as if there was nothing the matter. They were neither of them successful. I know Jim saw there was some trouble, but Jim is so wonderful, he never

has interfered in any way with us since we married. We must first give him our confidence, and even then he is very careful.

Of course I do not understand whether the trouble is between Jean and Ralph or whether it is due to some outside cause. But I must say, Jack dear, that though she has confided nothing to me, I did think Jean's manner toward her husband a strange one. And yet perhaps I am a little suspicious or just over anxious because—well, because," Frieda hesitated a fraction of a second and then went on, "because Henry and I had that misunderstanding after we were married which made us both so dreadfully unhappy and except for an accident might have wrecked our lives. It's a funny thing, isn't it, Jack, when one marries one thinks one's problems are over. I suppose that is because one is very young, and then naturally one finds out that if the old problems are over, there is an entirely new set. Even you and Frank used to have little differences now and then! And yet here you are still little more than a girl, and a widow, with a wholly different life to live until you marry again. Don't shake your head. One never knows. You always insisted, Jack, that you would not

marry when you were a girl, and yet you were married before any one of us.

"But I am wandering from my subject. You see, about Jean and Ralph, I don't know what to do, or whether any one of us has the right to attempt to secure their confidence unless they first offer it to us. At breakfast this morning Ralph Merritt announced that he was leaving the ranch again to-day and might be gone for some time. He was going to some frightfully hot place in New Mexico to see about a lately discovered gold mine, but Jean and the children would not go with him. And Jean made no protest of any kind. She did not even try to persuade Ralph to stay on at the Rainbow ranch for a few days until he had a chance to rest and they could be together for a little while. I never saw Jean behave so queerly or look so strangely. She was white and cold and severe, although she does look so unhappy, almost as if she were ill. You know she has always cared for me more than for you or Olive, and yet when I put my arm around her this morning and asked if she felt badly, she almost pushed me away and said that I would soon grow too tired of her to care whether she were

well or ill. Of course she will probably talk to me later on, yet it is funny. One might not think it, yet Jean is really more reserved than the rest of us.

"But what I am worrying over is, that by the time Jean makes up her mind to confide in any member of her family, Ralph will have gone. And if he goes, somehow I have a strange presentiment that it may be a long while before we see him again. Do you suppose you could speak to him? Ralph said this morning that he was coming to the lodge to have a talk with you as he really has never seen you alone since your arrival in this country. You and Ralph are pretty good friends! I don't know why it is, Jack, but boys and men talk to you more freely than they do to most girls or women, so will you undertake to find out what is the difficulty between Jean and Ralph before Ralph goes away? Try to learn if the trouble is some outside thing in which we could be useful. I know Jim Colter wants to offer to help Ralph, if he needs help, he admires and likes him so much, but I don't think Jim dares, Ralph looks in such an uncomfortable mood."

Without even an exclamation to interrupt

her sister's story, Jacqueline Kent had listened intently, her gray eyes a little clouded, her sympathetic face responding to every suggestion.

"Yet, Frieda, you feel I ought to question Ralph when Jim, who is his dear friend, is unwilling? I am afraid not, Frieda dear. You realize I have seen so little of Ralph and Jean since their marriage, as I have been living in England and they have been in the United States except while Ralph was in service in France. Secretly I confess I am a little afraid of Ralph, more than I am of either your husband or Olive's, Ralph is so quiet and apparently so self-sufficient. If he has made up his mind to a certain action I cannot believe that any one save Jean *could* influence him."

"Yes, but Jean won't *try* to influence him this time, at least this is my impression," Frieda added hastily, "and Ralph feels sorry for you at present, Jack dear, and admires the way you are facing things. He said so last night at dinner, said quite plainly that he admired you more than any one of the former Ranch girls, which was not especially polite of him, although I did not mind, even if Henry was there and might feel he

had made a mistake in marrying me instead of you, not that he could have married you, as you were engaged already. But I must get back home now, or else Ralph may arrive and perhaps believe I have been gossiping about him."

Hastily Frieda jumped up.

"Good gracious, Jack, isn't that Ralph on his way here this instant? It is either Ralph or some one like him! Let me slip into the house and stay there until you persuade Ralph to go for a walk, then I'll run home. I hope Jean will be too much engaged to miss me, I did not mention to any one I was coming over to the lodge. Good-by, dear; anyhow, you can do your best to follow my advice."

Scarcely a moment after Frieda had disappeared Jacqueline Kent went quickly forward to greet Ralph Merritt, who was walking slowly across one of the fields in the direction of the Rainbow lodge. At once Jack believed that even had Frieda not forewarned her, she must nevertheless have observed the trouble in Ralph's face.

"I have come to say good-by and hello at the same time, Jack," he announced. "Sorry not to see more of you, but I'm off for New

Mexico this afternoon, I don't know for how long a time."

Perhaps there are occasions in this life when frankness may not be desirable. But the spiritual frankness of Jacqueline Kent, which did not consist of saying unkind things to people under such a guise, but of going directly to the heart of what she felt and believed and of expecting the same thing of other human beings, nearly always served.

She did not hesitate at this instant.

"Ralph, I believe you are in some kind of difficulty. I think I have guessed partly by your expression and also because you would not leave the ranch so abruptly and with the suggestion that you may not return for many months without an important reason. I wonder if the trouble is a money one, Ralph, because if it is, you must let me help you. You know I have a fairly large estate and it is costing Jimmie and me almost nothing to live here at the lodge, and Jean,—Jean has been like my sister since the days when we spent our girlhood here as the 'Ranch Girls of the Rainbow Lodge.'"

Ralph shook his head.

"You're a trump, Jack, but that is out of the question. Suppose we walk down to

the Rainbow mine. I had not intended talking to any one, but perhaps it is best I should, and somehow, Jack, it is not so hard to confess one's mistakes to you as to most persons. I can't take your money because I have already lost most of Jean's and all of my own. Jean hates poverty and has lost faith in me besides. I don't altogether blame her, yet it has been hard for a good many of us to get started in the old fashion since the war ended, and these days the Government has so many regulations about mining gold that only where the output is large does the work pay. What I want to ask you, Jack, is to look after Jean and the little girls while I am away. I'll come back when I have made money, not before."

The man and girl had come to the neighborhood of the old Rainbow mine and stood near the edge of one of the disused pits.

"Yes, I understand, Ralph. Moreover, you have decided that it will not be worth while to attempt any more work in the Rainbow mine, at least not unless a new lode is discovered. Now I wonder, Ralph, if it has ever occurred to you how much Olive and Frieda and Jean and I owe to your former skill in working the Rainbow mine

in the past, how much of our fortunes are actually due to you? Does that not make a difference? Are you not more willing to let me be of assistance to you until you are able to repay me? Won't you at least promise me to talk to Jim Colter and to ask his advice before you leave?"

Ralph shook his head.

"No, and even if I were willing, and I am not, Jean would never consent. Many times she has told me how deeply she appreciated that fact that you and Frieda shared alike with her the output of the Rainbow mine when she was only your cousin and with no legal right to your inheritance. Having lost Jean's money, although she gave me her consent, even urged me to the investment, she has lost faith in me. What is more serious, I am even beginning to have less faith in myself. Yet I don't know why I am telling you all this, Jack, I had not intended to do more than say good-by. What hurts worse is that Jean does not care for me any more; I wonder now if she ever did care as I did. You know how important she has always counted wealth and position and I believed once I could give them to her, but lately I have failed and so Jean is disappointed. Funny thing marriage, Jack!"

"Funny thing life, Ralph, one is just a part of the whole! I think you are mistaken about Jean, but I have no right to express an opinion. Only if you do consider it wiser to fight it out alone, don't worry over Jean and the little girls. Jim would look after them even if I were not here. Queer that Jim, who came to us first as a cowboy and then the manager of the Rainbow ranch, should have been even kinder than an own father! Not that I think of Jim as so much older than I am! However, I'll stand by Jean through whatever comes, Ralph! And after a time, even if she is disappointed and hurt for the present, she is sure to change. I wish I dared to tell her the mistake she is making, only I don't dare. In any case, I'll do my best."

Ralph Merritt held out his hand.

"Shake hands, Jack, and let us say good-by. But before I leave you I want to say to you something else, something which may surprise you. I believe you came back to this country for some good purpose, Jacqueline Kent, some purpose none of us recognizes at present and you least of all. But if the day should come when you feel that some work calls you, don't be afraid to undertake it. Life has a queer

fashion of preparing people for what she wishes them to accomplish, without their knowing."

Jack smiled.

"I wonder what there can be ahead for me, Ralph? Yet some day I must find something, as I shall never marry again. Life on the old ranch is restful and charming, yet I suppose it won't continue to be enough. So let us wish each other good luck here in the shadow of the old mine where we discovered the 'Pot of Gold.' There must be other kinds of gold at the end of other rainbows."

CHAPTER IX

A YEAR LATER

"IT is harder to endure, Jack, because so much my own fault, all my life I must feel in a measure responsible, and I cannot feel hopeful as you insist you do, perhaps for that very reason. However, we must not talk too much of this now, to-morrow will be time enough. You must keep all the strength and self-control you possess for to-night."

It was more than a year later, and Jean Merritt and Jacqueline Ralston were in Jean's beautiful bedroom in the big house on the Rainbow ranch. Jean was sitting on a low couch with her hands clasped tightly together, while Jack was moving restlessly up and down the large, fragrant room.

"But I can't make a speech to-night, Jean, not after the bewildering news we have just received, although I will not believe it to be final. Why did I ever think I could? Yet surely there is a sufficient reason now for me to be excused!"

"Sit down for a few moments please, Jack," Jean answered with such an evidence of self-control and of unselfishness that her companion suffered a swift emotion of shame and compunction.

"Now there isn't any question but you must go on to-night with what you intended doing. Remember we all have decided that, for the time at least, it will be wiser to keep secret the information we have just received. Therefore you cannot make this your excuse for failing to speak as you planned. If you fail to speak this evening it will appear either that you are afraid to say what you think, or else that you have changed your opinion."

Jack flushed.

"But I *am* afraid. Am I not the last person in the world you would ever have dreamed attempting a public speech? And here I am involved in the effort to make one to-night, simply because I began talking first to our own ranchmen and then to the men on the neighboring ranches of some of the work I thought we ought to undertake in Wyoming. When I first began I did not know I was making a speech. To-night I shall probably know it without being able to make it. Still, I don't want to talk about

myself in the face of your problem, Jean. Now let us go over the news you have received and see if we both understand. Ralph has been away over a year, hasn't he, working always at the mine in New Mexico and writing regularly? The mine so far has not proved a success, but Ralph insisted that he still had faith in it and never spoke of leaving, or changing his work. Now word arrives that two weeks ago he had a serious fall into a pit which had been left uncovered, but that he seemed not badly hurt, only a little bruised and shaken and that he had continued with his duties that same day as if nothing had occurred. Then next morning, as he failed to appear, one of his men going to look for him found his tent empty. He has not been seen since. Yet no one had heard him go away in the night and there was nothing to suggest that he had intended remaining away, as his clothes and private papers were left behind. Naturally the people at the mine believed we had heard some word of him, and I believe we soon shall hear. Ralph will write or come to the Rainbow ranch, I am convinced of it. What is it you really think, Jean?"

Jean shook her head.

"I don't know what to think. Some tragedy may have happened to Ralph, or he may simply have grown too weary and discouraged to remain where he was any longer."

Getting up, Jean began walking up and down the big room with its rose-colored carpet as if her uncertainty and unhappiness must have a physical outlet.

"I have never told you in so many words, Jack, although I must have said enough for you to guess that Ralph and I parted without the tenderness and faith I should have shown him even if I believed he had made mistakes, because the mistakes were made chiefly for my sake. I thought I had learned a good deal in this year of his absence, but perhaps it was not enough, so I must bear this new anxiety. Ralph would have been happier married to you, Jack, than to me; I have thought this a good many times. You care nothing for wealth and society; I have always cared too much until lately. Now after this year with all of you at the old ranch I was learning a new set of values; except for wanting Ralph I have been so happy here just as we used to be as children, even if we have a new group of younger Ranch girls. Now, unless I hear from Ralph

within the next twenty-four hours I mean to go to New Mexico to find him. I should have been with him through this year, enduring the hardships he has been forced to endure, instead of living in comfort and idleness here at the ranch."

"But you have not lived in idleness, Jean, whatever else you may accuse yourself of. Managing this big place, keeping house for Jim and his little girls and for Frieda and her family is hardly being idle. Jim says he has not been so at ease since Ruth died. It's funny Jim told me he thought it wiser for Professor Russell to go in search of Ralph unless we receive word immediately than that he should go, although Jim and Ralph are devoted friends. Jim says that Henry is a scientist, but a more practical man of affairs than the rest of us give him credit for being. Yet somehow I don't believe Jim is willing to leave us alone at the ranch, not only his own little girls, but you and Frieda and Olive and me. He insists on driving me over to Laramie to-night, although I do not feel he likes my speaking in public. However, when I asked his advice he merely said: 'Go ahead, Jack, do what you wish to do; your life is your own. If I am an

old fogy and should prefer you to stay quietly at the lodge, I never have expected it of you since you came back and resumed your American citizenship. As long as you don't go too far I'll stand behind you.' "

Jack smiled.

"Of course I don't know what Jim means by 'too far,' but I suppose he will tell me in time. Now I am going away, Jean dear, and leave you to try to rest. Remember, I believe firmly that we shall hear from Ralph within the next few days, or the next few hours, who knows? But Olive and Captain MacDonnell will stay with you to-night, as Frieda and Professor Russell wish to drive over to the Woman's Club with me. At least if I am to make a speech I am glad it is to be made there. Frieda is too funny. She is torn between being rather proud of my being a sufficiently prominent person in the neighborhood for people to be willing to listen to me, and thinking it unwomanly of me to attempt to speak. Besides, I think she shares my present conviction that I am going to break down and so disgrace myself and all of us. Yet it is such a simple thing I wish to talk about, and anyone ought to be able to say what one thinks."

As Jack rose, Jean placed her hands on her cousin's shoulders, her brown eyes gazing steadfastly into Jack's gray ones.

"No, it is not going to be difficult for you to-night, Jack, not after you have once started with your speech. It will be difficult at first, of course, to face an audience of men and women for the first time in your life. You have said a good many times just what you will say to-night, but I know that you have never considered before that you *were* making a speech. But it will be a success, Jack, because to you it is always a simple thing for people to be straightforward and honest and public-spirited. Now go and lie down yourself for an hour or so. I am going to see what the little girls are doing."

Jack laughed.

"No, I am going off for a ride alone, Jean. It is funny, but Billy Preston, one of our cowboys, told me I should not ride alone, not even over our own ranch. Already there seems to be a good deal of feeling against me because of what I have been advocating. As if I were of enough importance to be considered dangerous! But please don't speak of this to any one else; I must ride alone now and then, and I have promised

Jim never to leave our ranch without an escort. It is curious that I can think better on horseback than at any other times. Other people manage the same thing by lying down, or walking through the country, or in crowded city streets. I believe some writers can only dictate when they are striding up and down their rooms. But I am off now, really this time, Jean. I'll have a light supper at the lodge, as we start about seven. In the morning I'll tell you the worst, or probably Frieda will tell you before I can see you."

A moment after Jacqueline Kent was gone.

After her departure Jean suffered a stronger sensation of discouragement. It was always true that Jacqueline Kent possessed a vitality so keen and a sweetness of character so inherently sincere, that one was apt to be stimulated and cheered by her companionship.

Later in the same day driving toward town, Jack remained unusually quiet. She was riding in the front seat of a Ford car seated beside Jim Colter and listening with some amusement to her sister Frieda's conversation with her husband, which Frieda had not the slightest objection to having overheard.

"I feel perfectly convinced that Jack is going to break down, Henry, or perhaps not

even be able to begin her speech when she faces her audience. I do wish I had not come. Of course you and Jim won't mind so much because you are no real relation to Jack, so I shall feel much more embarrassed than anyone else. However, my one comfort will be that if Jack does make a complete failure to-night she will never attempt to speak in public again. I don't see why she should care so much what the other ranchmen in Wyoming do, so long as we are successful with our own ranch. But then one never has been able to count upon what Jack would think or do. We are not in the least alike."

"But my dear Frieda," Professor Russell expostulated, speaking in a hushed voice intended only for Frieda's ears, "don't you think it unkind of you to suggest failure to your sister at this late hour? If you did not wish her to speak you should have remonstrated earlier."

"Oh, I did talk to her; indeed I am sure I have discussed nothing else for the past week. Sometimes I have told Jack I would never forgive her; if she went on with what she had been doing, and then again I advised her to make a perfectly wonderful speech at

the Woman's Club to-night, just to show the stupid people who object to her how clever and charming she is, and how right. Of course I think Jack is right about a few things now and then."

In answer to Jack's gay laughter from the front seat and Jim Colter's chuckle, even to her husband's amused smile, Frieda continued undisturbed.

"Frieda dear, you are a tonic and I won't dare fail if you feel as you do about me," Jack called back over her shoulder. "You are more refreshing than Jim, who tells me I am sure to succeed in convincing my audience to-night, when deep down inside of him he is sure I will not. Yet you won't desert me if the worst happens, Frieda?"

Frieda shook her blonde head.

"No, Jack, I shall never turn my back upon you really, no matter what you do, even if I disapprove of it most dreadfully, perhaps not even if you should run for some public office in the state of Wyoming as if you were a man. Of course the suggestion is absurd, but I did hear some one say you might become an influence in the state of Wyoming."

"Yes, that was absurd, Frieda dear,"

Jack returned, resting her head lightly on Jim Colter's shoulder and closing her ears to Frieda's patter in order to try to think more clearly of the task ahead of her.

The subject upon which Jacqueline Kent was to speak to-night was a simple one, so simple that she had not understood why there should be any opposition to her suggestion. In the beginning it had been only a suggestion.

Jacqueline Kent desired the ranchmen of Wyoming to increase the number of their livestock and to have larger herds of cattle, and droves of sheep, with a view of making the state of Wyoming the most important ranch state in the country. The world was never before in so great need of food and clothing.

Yet soon her little talks with the Rainbow ranchmen and the men from the adjoining ranches became known throughout the neighborhood. Then to her surprise Jack discovered that a large number of the prominent men in Wyoming opposed her suggestion. Among these men were Senator Marshall and her former acquaintance, Peter Stevens, who was employed as an attorney to limit the supply of livestock raised in Wyoming.

To-night Jack had been asked to present her view of the question before a group of men and women in the Woman's Club in Laramie. The building was a large one. Later, when Jack stepped out upon the platform she faced an audience of several hundred persons.

An instant the faces swam before her and her courage failed. Then she appreciated that her first sentences could not be heard beyond the first few rows of chairs.

CHAPTER X

A MAIDEN SPEECH

NEVERTHELESS Jack looked very young, attractive and frightened. Her color had vanished, her wide gray eyes held an expression of appeal for patience and understanding.

She was dressed in the costume she ordinarily preferred in the evening, a black tulle over black silk, cut with a square neck and with elbow sleeves, and, although of exquisite material, made in a simple fashion. Usually caring little for jewelry, to-night she was wearing a pearl and amethyst star which her husband had given her years before.

As her glance now swept the audience she beheld the faces she especially wished *not* to see, Jim Colter's, her sister Frieda's, and her neighbors, Senator and Mrs. Marshall's. Not far away and staring fixedly at her was the somewhat grim countenance of her former acquaintance, Peter Stevens.

Upon Jim Colter's fine, deeply lined face—

his coal black hair was now turning slightly gray—was a look with which Jack had been familiar since her girlhood. The look said more plainly than words that Jim was always there to fight her battles and whether she succeeded or failed, she could count upon him. Frieda's face was set and white and miserable, her blue eyes open to their fullest extent, announcing as plainly as her lips could have stated:

"Why, why did I ever permit Jack to make such a spectacle of herself? Have I not warned her that she could never make a public speech? Yet after all, the fault is partly mine, as I should never have allowed her to undertake such a task!"

It was Frieda's honest conviction that, as she had a great deal more common sense than either her sister or husband, it was not only their duty but their privilege to yield to her judgment in practical matters.

The expression with which Senator Marshall regarded her, Jack believed she recognized as one of amused tolerance, not unmixed with satisfaction. He had talked seriously to her of the mistake she was making in her present ideas. He also thoroughly disapproved of women attempting public speeches

under any conditions whatsoever, and of this Jack also had been kindly informed. Mrs. Marshall's attitude did not affect Jacqueline Kent in any fashion. Long before she had accepted the fact that Mrs. Marshall did not like her and resented any influence she might have gained in the neighborhood. Especially Mrs. Marshall had seemed to dislike her stepson John Marshall's boyish friendship and admiration for his neighbor. If John had come to hear her speak to-night he was not seated with his parents, for Jack's subconscious mind was registering these small and unimportant impressions even as her lips moved almost inaudibly in the address she was endeavoring to make.

However, the one face which seemed to arouse Jack more completely than the others was that of her former acquaintance, Peter Stevens. In the past year Peter Stevens had become more than an acquaintance. If they were not friends he appeared to enjoy calling at the Rainbow lodge, for one could count upon seeing him there probably once a week. His expression at present was undoubtedly one of pleasure at her failure. Jack felt distinctly angry.

"Louder," some one called from the back

of the hall, and hearing the call, she paused and an instant remained silent. Speaking again, it was apparent that both her manner and voice had changed. The self-command which had in a measure deserted her was slowly being regained.

"I am sorry, I fear a good many members of my audience have not been able to hear what I have been saying," she answered, speaking in a fashion which seemed to take the men and women who were her listeners into her confidence, making the greater number of them her advocates rather than her critics. "I suppose it is scarcely worth while confessing that I have never made a public speech before and have no idea how much one should raise one's voice. Yet the subject I want to talk about to-night is such a simple and direct one that I really and truly don't see why it should be discussed in any public fashion. I am only here because some of you felt it might be wise for me to state my opinion. Nevertheless, I am sure I agree with any of you who feel my opinion may not be valuable.

"Most of you know that I came back from England more than a year ago and because I loved my own country better than my adopted one, I have resumed my American citizenship.

Yet when I speak of loving my country I think I mean first of all that I love my state, the state of Wyoming, where I was born and lived as a girl, and that the parts of Wyoming I love best are her great and beautiful ranches.

"On my return, to my surprise I discovered that instead of the ranches in Wyoming having increased in the last few years and the quantity of livestock become greater, they now cover less acreage and the livestock is smaller in number. I was sorry; our state is so lovely, with its broad stretches of fertile prairies, our rivers and streams, and our hills set like a rim of jewels about them. So first I began talking to the men on our own ranch, the Rainbow ranch, asking them if it would not be possible to increase the number of our cattle and sheep. Since the close of the war we have heard of nothing but of how hungry the world is, at least the European world. So I did not dream there could be any objection if I talked to other ranchmen beside our own and asked them what their plans for the future were to be. We all know that many of the men who are now working on the ranches in the United States intend owning their own places as soon as possible. Many of them are soldiers

who, having returned from the war in Europe, now wish to lead an outdoor life and enjoy the freedom and the independence which the ranch life offers. And wherever and whenever I have talked to the former soldiers who have come to dwell in Wyoming they have seemed to agree with me.

"The views of the people who oppose the idea of increasing the number of our ranches and the supply of our livestock I confess I am too stupid to understand. They seem to feel that Wyoming's future lies in her cities, in her mineral deposits, and even in her recent large manufactories.

"They believe we will receive less for our cattle and horses if we raise a greater number. Yet say this is true, and I do not accept its truth, how will the ranchmen be injured if the cost of the increase in his expenses is covered by the greater number of his stock? And this we have found to be the case in the past years' experiment with the livestock on the Rainbow ranch."

Jack paused again, but this time not because she was either frightened or embarrassed. She had given up the effort to make a speech after having undertaken it, having discovered that she was not being successful. Since

then she had been talking to her audience in the same fashion that she would have spoken to any single individual who might have expressed an interest in her subject.

"I wonder," she remarked clearly and distinctly, "if there is any one present who is entirely unprejudiced and is willing to state the other side of this question, to explain why the state of Wyoming should cease to be a great ranch state. Perhaps Senator Marshall or Mr. Peter Stevens will speak upon the subject."

As Jack ceased there was a momentary pause followed by a ripple of laughter. The word "unprejudiced" had amused her audience. Peter Stevens was known to be employed by the interests who wished to decrease the supply of cattle in the state, while Senator Marshall's political party advocated the same point of view.

However, Senator Marshall so far accepted Jacqueline Kent's challenge as to arise in his place. Bowing, he said blandly:

"I never argue a point with a woman."

And first his retort was greeted with a murmur of indignation and then of renewed laughter.

Gazing directly into his face, Jack protested:

"But, Senator Marshall, do you not consider that the day has passed for failing to argue points with women? We are voters and if points cannot be argued, at least certain questions must be made plain. To-night we are in a Woman's Club built largely with the idea of offering women the opportunity to find out some of the problems they intend to understand."

A few moments later, having received no reply from Peter Stevens, who seemed to have chosen to ignore her request, closing her speech more eloquently than she had begun it, in the midst of friendly applause, Jack bowed and withdrew from the platform.

A little later amid a group of friends and acquaintances unconsciously she still held the center of the stage.

"You were not so bad as I expected, Jack, although I was a little disappointed in you," Frieda found time to murmur, feeling in the midst of her pessimism a great sense of relief. Not only was the speech over, but in spite of it Jack was looking extremely pretty and no less feminine than she had previously.

Jim Colter simply nodded his head to reveal his satisfaction, while her brother-in-law, Professor Henry Tilford Russell, shook hands, announcing frankly:

"You did yourself credit, Jack, not to *attempt* to make a speech. It is better to talk simply upon a subject until you know more about it, and afterwards for the matter of that."

But outside Jacqueline Kent's own family, many of her friends were enthusiastic.

"I do not see why we should not ask you to run for an office in the gift of the state of Wyoming some day, Mrs. Kent," the President of the Woman's Club declared in a tone sufficiently loud to be heard by a large group of persons. "No one denies that an American woman, Lady Nancy Astor, is making an excellent member of the British Parliament. Why should we be so much more conservative than England? Moreover, Lady Astor is an American woman."

In return Jack laughed, failing to attach any seriousness to the suggestion.

"Yes, but unfortunately I have none of Lady Astor's gifts," she responded. "Nevertheless there may be some one in Wyoming who has, and perhaps it would be interesting if Wyoming, one of the first states to give the vote to women, should be represented by a woman in Washington. You would dislike the idea very much, wouldn't you, Senator Marshall?"

Senator Marshall, who had come up to shake hands with Jack, nodded vehemently.

"I should indeed dislike it; I still am sufficiently old-fashioned enough to believe that woman's place is the home."

A voice behind his shoulder interrupted.

"Nonsense, father, you are simply afraid of Mrs. Kent as your possible rival, for if ever she is elected to Congress the next step will be to defeat you for the United States Senate."

The voice was John Marshall's, the senator's son and Jack's devoted friend.

"Thanks, but don't make the Senator disapprove of me any more than he does at present. I must live in peace with my neighbors."

A little to Jack's surprise Peter Stevens made no effort to shake hands with her or to speak to her, although she remained half an hour in the Woman's Club after her poor effort at speech-making was concluded. Peter Stevens was there also talking to other friends.

She was standing alone out on the sidewalk waiting for Jim Colter to drive up with the car, Frieda and her husband having moved a few feet away to speak to some one, when Peter Stevens' voice said unexpectedly:

"Good-night, Jack. I suppose it would make no difference to you to realize how intensely I disliked your speaking in public this evening." He and Jack within he past year had returned to their youthful custom of calling each other by their first names.

However, Jack's answer surprised him.

"Oh, I don't know; perhaps you are right. I might consider you an old fogey, Peter, to object to girls and women speaking what they believe to be true, but it is probably true that at least no one should speak in public who has no more talent than I possess. You were kind not to make me appear worse by displaying your learning and eloquence afterwards. No, I am not being sarcastic; every one says you are learned and eloquent. Yet in spite of your reputation, I have the courage to think you are mistaken about a number of matters. But here is Jim with the car, so good-night. Why, yes, of course I'll be glad to see you at the lodge; differences of opinion need not destroy friendship."

CHAPTER XI

THE PROPOSALS

ONE spring day an automobile containing four men and two women drove up and stopped before the Rainbow lodge.

The half dozen guests must have been expected, because within a few moments after they were ushered into the big living-room of the lodge, which had altered but little in character in many years, Jacqueline Kent, who had been Jacqueline Ralston in the old days, came downstairs to greet her visitors.

The call could not have been merely a social one, else Jack would scarcely have appeared so pale and preoccupied and so unlike her usual radiant and vital self.

Slowly she had descended the stairs, and entering her own living-room had shaken hands with four of the six persons whom she knew and had then been introduced to the other two. Afterwards she sat down in a chair and listened quietly, rarely doing more than introduce a sentence now and then.

At the close of nearly an hour, when the visitors, declining to remain for dinner, had risen to say farewell, Jack also stood up, facing them.

She stood with the mantel and the bookshelves forming her background. Upon the mantel were several of the possessions she had treasured in her childhood, Indian bowls of strange shape and antiquity, her father's pistol, the first nugget of gold she and Frank Kent, who was afterwards to be her husband, had discovered in the Rainbow mine. In the old bookshelves were the self-same books she and Olive and Jean and Frieda had read and studied in their girlhood, studied far too little until the coming of Ruth to act as their governess.

Outside the big living-room windows Jack could see the long double row of tall cottonwood trees now grown through the years to mammoth proportions and away and beyond the purple fields of the blossoming alfalfa and the newly sprouting tender green spears of grain, all her own beloved and familiar background.

"I am sure you realize I appreciate the honor you have done me," she said finally, speaking in hesitating fashion. "Yet I do

not believe I dare give you my answer this afternoon. You have been kind enough to say that I may have two more days for considering your proposal, and within that time I shall of course let you hear. You are sure you cannot stay longer, not even for tea?"

Ten minutes later, on the porch of the lodge Jack stood alone, watching the automobile containing her six callers roll down the avenue between the cottonwood trees and pass out the gate which separated the lodge grounds from the rest of the Rainbow ranch.

For a short time Jack continued her watch, glancing first in one direction and then in another as if expecting some one else to approach with an evident wish to see her.

The afternoon was in early May. The air blowing from the snow-capped hills closer to the western horizon brought with it the fragrances of damp wooded places, mingled with the wealth of prairie flowers over which it had more lately passed.

Jacqueline Ralston Kent threw back her shoulders, lifted her head and inhaled a deep breath.

"I wonder why Jim, Jean, Frieda and Olive do not come to find out what decision I have reached," she remarked aloud. "This must be some prearranged plan that I am to be left alone for a time. And yet it is unlike my younger sister, Frieda, not to continue to express her opinion and insist I agree with it whether or not it happens to be my own. Perhaps being left alone may be more effective than the usual family opposition toward bringing me around to their way of thinking. Yet the family is divided in their viewpoint, and so whatever I may do I must please some of them and displease others. If I am to be left alone I think I'll go for a ride. I wish Jimmie were here to go with me: I intend to talk my problem over with Jimmie—this and every problem we ever have to face. But of course with Jim looking after the branding of the new calves this afternoon what chance have I of Jimmie's being anywhere near?"

Not long after, with her costume changed to her riding-habit, Jack went back to the stable of the lodge and finding no one there, saddled her own mare, a present from Jim Colter several years before, and rode off.

Before leaving, she explained to the old

half-Indian woman who looked after her small household that she would not return until dinner time. If she were late Jimmie was to eat his dinner and not wait for her.

It was true that Jacqueline Kent felt she was facing this afternoon one of the greatest decisions of her life, almost as important a decision as her marriage. Perhaps in some persons' eyes a more important decision, since it was more unusual than marriage in the lives of most women.

It was so strange and so unexpected that at present Jack herself was scarcely able to accept the momentous fact. Yet here it was before her staring her in the face, awaiting her judgment and shutting out the dim spring loveliness of the sky and plains.

"Should she or should she not? Would she or would she not? The refrain had a stupid sound in Jack's ears. She caught herself wondering which was grammatical and then concluded that both expressions were right in her case, since both her future and her will were involved in her present conclusion.

Who would have believed that upon her return to Wyoming, her simple desire to become an American citizen again and later

her interest in the prosperity and happiness of her state could involve her in such a situation? Within the last hour, was it really possible that she, Jacqueline Ralston Kent, one of the four original "Ranch Girls of the Rainbow Lodge," had been asked to accept the nomination for the United States Congress and become among the first women representatives in the country?

Jack bit her lips, put her hand to her face to feel the sudden flush which had suffused it at the thought of her own unfitness for so great a responsibility.

Then she gave her horse its head and started upon a swift canter; for a little while she must put away the question which so troubled her. Appreciating her own lack of knowledge and of training for the task ahead, why not decline at once and for all time ever to consider it? Yet on the other hand, had she the right to evade so wonderful an opportunity? She was young and could learn a good deal of what she should know in order to meet such a responsibility. Moreover, she did have the interest of her state at heart and some of her friends and acquaintances must have believed in her, else the nomination would never have been offered her.

Besides, if she were honest, frank, and open-minded, would it not be a wonderful experience? Jack was only lately a girl, and in her heart of hearts felt it would actually be great fun to be among the early vanguard of the women who were to hold important political offices in the United States.

"Yet of course, even if I conclude to accept the nomination, I won't unless Jim Colter finally gives his consent. I refuse to be regulated by Frieda. Besides, why worry? After all, there is not one chance in a hundred that I shall ever be elected!"

Lightly Jack touched her horse with her riding whip; she had believed an ordinary gait would suffice to distract her thoughts for a little time, but evidently this was not sufficient. Her horse was moving quickly and evenly over the smooth road and still her thoughts had continued unchanged. He must break into a run—a run so swift and headlong, as if in a race for a goal, that all her thought should be centered upon his control. She needed to feel the strong rush of the wind in her ears, the splendid sensation of being a part of the movement which she so enjoyed.

She had promised not to ride outside of the

Rainbow ranch alone, an absurd promise which several of the cowboys had suggested, and which Jim Colter had insisted upon. She had made enemies within the last year by the outspoken position she had taken upon a number of questions. At present there were rumors that if she accepted the nomination to Congress she would be forced to regret it. Yet these rumors appeared to Jack as nothing save stupid gossip and sensationalism and not to be regarded.

However, boring as it might be upon occasions like this afternoon, when she would like to have gotten as far away from the Rainbow ranch as her horse could take her within a two hours' ride, nevertheless she intended keeping her promise.

The outermost borders of the Rainbow ranch were enclosed by a high paling fence to prevent the escape of the cattle.

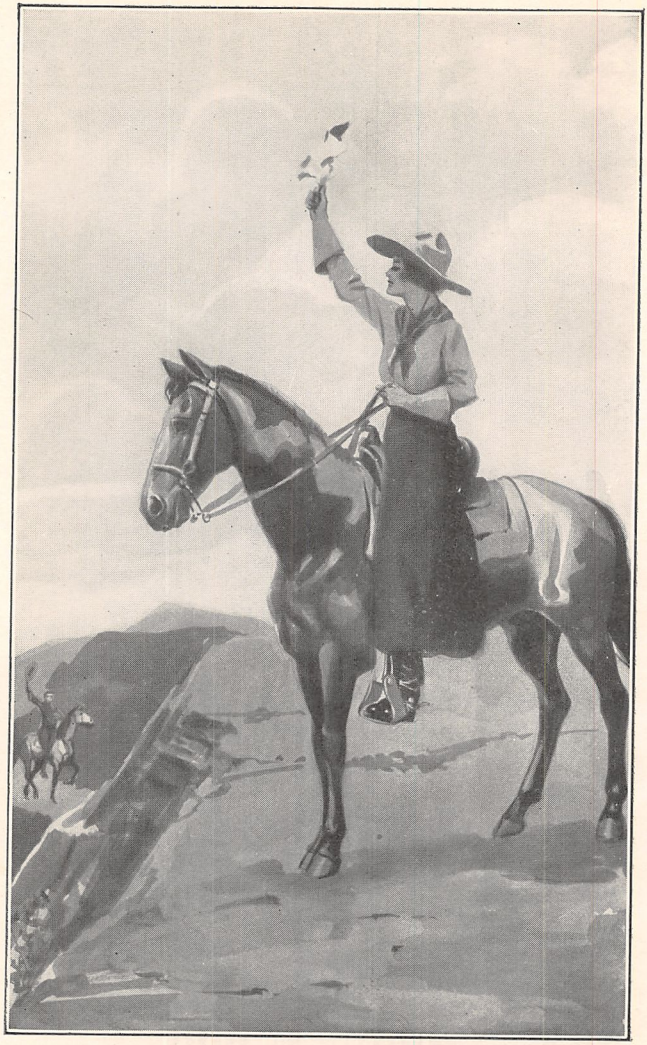
When she had ridden a little more than an hour Jack arrived at one of the borders of the ranch, in the same vicinity where at one time there had been a serious dispute with a neighbor over the boundary line. This was near the end of the Rainbow creek, at one time considered chiefly valuable for the watering of the stock and afterwards found to contain valuable gold deposits.

Those had been strenuous and fighting days at the Rainbow ranch. First there was the effort to make a living for the family and then to achieve a certain amount of education for the four Ranch girls. Afterwards had come the adjustment of their legal rights to the ranch, in the days when the possibility that gold might be discovered made the possession too valuable to pass to four obscure young girls. How the manager of their ranch, a fellow named Jim Colter, who so far as the neighbors knew at that time had sprung from nowhere, had fought and won their battles for them!

Well, those old days had passed and this afternoon Jack concluded that no such perilous times could ever return, whether or not she chose to be among the pioneers and enter the political arena.

By this time she had ceased her rapid gait and had come to the bridle path which led along the far side of Rainbow creek. The path ascended among high rocks and crags, almost the only hilly portion of the entire ranch. At the top there was an especially fine view.

At present Jack rode slowly, allowing her horse opportunity to rest now and then after his swift run.



JACK REINED IN HER HORSE AND SAT STILL SILHOUETTED AGAINST THE SKY

Jack herself felt in better spirits, more exhilarated. Not having fully reached a decision, nevertheless she had managed for a brief time to banish the question to her subconscious mind, hoping it was still wrestling with the problem and might later help her with its solution.

She glanced among the rocks and crags, remembering how she and the other Ranch girls had played hide and seek among them as children. Long before when Wyoming was largely inhabited by Indian tribes the Indians had lived among these rocks sheltered from their enemies. Indian treasures had been discovered buried under the earth or fallen between crevices of stone.

Reaching a level space of ground, Jack reined in her horse and sat still, silhouetted against the sky. Behind her the sun was setting in purple and gold clouds. Below she caught a glimpse of another figure on horseback approaching in her direction. Putting her hand to her lips Jack called "Hello." She was under the impression that the rider was either Jim Colter or one of the Rainbow ranch cowboys, and they were all her friends. As it was growing late it might be pleasant to have an escort home.

A lifting of a hat and a wave of a hand returning her greeting, Jack uttered a little exclamation of surprise.

She waited until Peter Stevens had climbed up the bridle path and was beside her.

"I have come to ask you, Jack, if there is any possibility of your accepting the offer which was made you to-day? Please understand that it is no secret. There has been talk of your nomination for Congress for a good many months, not weeks. I presume you realize that if you accept you will be my opponent? I also am to run for the same office, unless you would like me to withdraw. I am willing if you wish to have me do so. Yet I would give up a good many more important things in my life if I could persuade you to refuse this nomination. I know you think I am old-fashioned, narrow, dogmatic, yet with all my heart and all my intelligence I oppose the thought of our American women holding public office. And you of all women, Jack! Why, with all the experience of life you think you have had, you are little more than a girl. It must be impossible for you to realize the jealousies, the calumnies and feuds that will be aroused by your action. In this past year I have seen

you fairly often; never so frequently as I desired, yet you must have learned to know whether you like or dislike me. Won't you be my wife, Jack, and go with me to Washington in that capacity and not as my political adversary? I would do a great deal to prevent your making such a mistake."

More surprised than she cared to show, Jack shook her head, her face slowly flushing.

"I am sure you are very kind, Peter, and I do appreciate the honor you have done me, because I do realize how great a sacrifice you are making. Yet perhaps you need not have been put to such a test, for although I cannot accept your offer, perhaps I shall not accept the other offer either. I know my own limitations for such a distinguished office as well as even you can know them. However, I make no promise. Will you ride back to the lodge to dinner with me?"

Peter Stevens shook his head and an hour after Jack arrived at the Rainbow lodge alone.

CHAPTER XI

A DECISION

JACK, however, did not reach a decision that night, although many hours she lay awake continuing to revolve the subject in her mind.

The next day the opposition she again encountered was even keener than any that had gone before.

Not long after breakfast Frieda made the first family appearance, bringing her little girl with her.

Seeing her sister approach, Jack, who had stepped out of doors for a moment for a breath of fresh air, feeling more fatigued than she scarcely ever recalled being at this hour of the morning, gave a quickly suppressed sigh and then held out her arms to Peace.

Thoroughly she and Frieda had gone over this question of her possible nomination when the matter simply had been under discussion. Frieda had then aired her views as fully as it seemed possible that any expres-

sion of opinion could be aired. Not for a single instant was Jack even to allow her mind to rest upon the idea. "A woman politician in the family!" Personally Frieda felt and announced that she could not endure the disgrace.

From the first had she not warned her sister that public speech making would lead to something more disastrous?

Now as Jack greeted her sister she was painfully aware that Frieda's face wore the familiar expression it was wont to wear when she had appointed herself both judge and jury in a case and allowed no counsel for the defendant.

Pretending to ignore the expression, nevertheless, Jack felt a little ominous sinking of the heart. She was not prepared to allow Frieda to make this decision for her, and had so informed her, as gently and firmly as possible, in their previous talks together upon the self-same topic.

And Jack did not wish to be drawn into any further argument this morning, and certainly not with her sister. All her life she had hated argument more than any one of the four Ranch girls, and in the old days used often to run away for a ride or a long

walk, leaving the matter to be settled by the other three, who discussed the point to exhaustion.

"Glad to see you, Frieda dear, it is nice to see you so early in the morning and with the baby, especially when I am tired, which does not happen often to me. Will you come indoors or shall we walk about among your old violet beds? They are blooming in special abundance. Perhaps it may amuse Peace to gather some and take them home to the big house. I always feel as if I were selfish having so much more enjoyment from your flower beds than the rest of the family. Remember, Frieda dear, when you planned to be a florist and to rescue the family by selling violets? It was sweet of you."

"I'll stay outdoors and Peace can gather the violets if she wishes, but I did not come down to the lodge at this hour to discuss violets. I never do anything early in the morning, as you know, unless it seems to me excessively important. I know those people appeared here yesterday afternoon, Jacqueline Ralston Kent, to offer you the nomination for Congress; they want you to become a Congressman, or Congresswoman. Who ever heard of such a foolish title? Now I wish to know

precisely what answer you gave them. I would have walked down to the lodge last night with Henry, except that both Henry and Jim Colter insisted I should leave you alone and give you time to think the matter over for yourself before I spoke to you again."

"But you haven't anything *different* to say, have you, Frieda, so why let us talk of it at all?"

"To that I will agree only upon *one* condition, Jacqueline Kent. You must promise me to refuse this nomination once and for all time and never so long as you live have anything to do with politics either in this country or in England."

"That is rather a tall order, don't you think, Frieda?" Jack answered, purposely looking in another direction rather than toward her sister's face.

Frieda always would appear to her a grown up and glorified baby, so long, when they were little girls together, had she looked upon Frieda almost more as a mother than as an older sister.

"Yet unless you do promise, Jack, it can never be the same between us again. So please listen carefully before you reply.

"I know at other times I have objected

to small things that you wished to do and sometimes you went ahead and did them without regard to my feelings or my judgment and I never said anything much afterwards even if they did not turn out successfully. But this is a *big* thing and a *different* thing, and if you act against my wish I told Henry last night I should never really forgive you, even if for the sake of appearances we pretended that things were the same. I have been much embarrassed recently at your becoming a prominent person in the neighborhood; of course I wished you to be prominent socially and to become a leader, like Mrs. Senator Marshall. She would then be obliged to take second place, in spite of her husband's distinguished position. But the idea that you, my sister, could actually become interested in politics!" Frieda pronounced the word as if it were a deadly poison. "Why, it simply never dawned upon me, not for the longest time! When we went about to parties together after you had been in Wyoming a year I began to hear people say laughingly that Wyoming needed a young and charming woman to represent her in political life so that she should not fall behind the other states. So why were you not the

person, as Lady Astor was in England? The cases were a little alike, you had married an Englishman and had the title of Lady Kent, but after your husband's death had preferred to return to your own country, renounce your title and resume your American citizenship. You had gone through all the necessary legal formalities to attain that end, you were clever and good-looking and your actions had proved you were a thoroughly patriotic American. The fact that you said you did not belong to any party was perhaps best of all, as women needed to be independent in politics. They were the new voters and should not be slaves to parties as so many American men were.

"This is as nearly as I can remember what was said about you, Jack. There were other things, not so flattering, but I presume most persons would not like to mention them before me. However, I paid little attention at first, as I thought it was all just talk, because most people have so little to talk about really. Even when you began making speeches about the things you wish to have accomplished in the state of Wyoming (as if your opinion was of any value), why, I did not trouble specially! It all seemed so

absurd! Indeed, when you spoke to me a few days ago of what might occur and declared that the nomination for the Congress of the United States might actually be given to you, though I said everything against it I could at the time, I did not really believe it. Then yesterday afternoon actually it happened! But perhaps you refused to consider the suggestion, Jack. Indeed, I feel sure after what I have said to you and knowing Jim Colter's attitude, even if he has said but little, you must have refused. If so, I am sorry to have tired you by talking so much; I am sure I hate talking at any length unless I feel it my duty."

"And you do feel it your duty this time, don't you, Frieda?" Jack answered, slipping her arm through her younger sister's.

"Still, having done your duty, don't you think that after all I may be allowed to use my own judgment in this decision? Suppose I happen to think that life just now is offering me a great and surprising opportunity! It is surprising for me to have been chosen for this distinction; I feel this as keenly as any one of my family or friends, knowing my deficiencies, can feel it! Now don't you think it's unfair to threaten me, Frieda, to

threaten in the one way which you know hurts most, the loss of any part of your affection, if I cannot make up my mind to do what you think best for me, not what I may think best for myself? I have never in all our lives, Frieda, suggested that any act of yours could possibly make me care for you less."

Frieda's voice wavered a little.

"Yes, I know, Jack, but then I would never do anything so rash and so foolish as what you contemplate. To see your name in the newspapers, to know that people are everywhere discussing your private affairs, making up disagreeable stories about you if they wish, for you know you are unconventional, Jack, and sometimes do give people opportunities to misjudge you, well, I simply can't bear it. So come on, baby, let us go back home, I see we are in the way here. I apologize, Jack, for wasting your time and mine. I had some socks of Henry's I wished to darn, and I should have been much better employed, as I see you already have reached your decision. Well, Jack, I am sure something very unfortunate will come of any such decision; when you become a public character you will certainly never be the same person to me."

Frieda had slipped her hand inside her little girl's and was about to move away when Jack's arms went round her and her gray eyes, filled with tears, gazed into Fireda's implacable blue ones.

"Frieda, in spite of all your sweetness, don't you realize that you are rather hard sometimes? I wonder if life will ever teach you to be different?"

Frieda's eyes wavered an instant.

"I see nothing to be gained by discussing my weaknesses of character. So long as I satisfy my husband and child I can manage without your good opinion, especially now I know that my interest and my wishes have not the slightest effect upon you." Frieda walked resolutely away.

Several minutes after her departure Jack continued standing in the same spot. Frieda had opened her eyes. She had been thinking that she was still uncertain of her decision and now knew that unconsciously her mind was made up. She intended to accept the nomination which had been offered her and to do everything in her power honestly to win the election.

Returning to Wyoming where she had lived as a child and young girl, she had confided

to Jim Colter that she must look for some new and absorbing task to fill her life now that her married life was over. What this interest would be she had not then conceived. What it might be in the future was still uncertain. Yet the next step lay straight ahead.

Never in all their lives had she and Frieda had so serious a difference of opinion, and Frieda's words and manner had hurt more than anything that had happened since her return to the security of her former home. She could only hope that Frieda would relent, that Professor Russell would use his influence in her favor. Nevertheless, although frequently led by Frieda in small matters, on this occasion she had not been in the slightest degree affected. This was a big decision which she faced, a decision in which Frieda had but scant right to interfere. Of course she must allow for prejudice, certain suggestions which her sister had put forward had made her wince more than she cared to show. But over and against the small things was there not the one big opportunity that she might serve both her country and other women if she did not fail too completely in the work which might or might not lie ahead?

Then in a boyish fashion wiping the tears from her eyes with the back of her hand, Jack laughed. "Oh, Frieda will probably forgive me if I make a success, never if I am a failure! People forgive nearly everything to success."

"Jimmie," she called a little later, running around the side of the lodge where her small son was engaged in playing with a magnificent St. Bernard dog which had been a recent gift from Jim Colter, "won't you go up into the woods behind the Rainbow creek with me and spend the day? We will take our lunch and I'll take my rifle. I don't believe there are many animals left in our woods these days, but there used to be years ago and at least we can play at being pioneers."

But Jack and Jimmie were not to escape so easily.

Opening the gate which led from the front yard half an hour later, they came face to face with Jean Merritt and Olive MacDonnell.

"Trying to run away into your beloved outdoors in the usual fashion, Jack?" Olive said, smiling. "Well, you may go after a while, but Jean and I wish to talk to you first."

"Please don't," Jack murmured, slipping

a hand into the hand of the two other original Rainbow ranch girls. "Frieda has already reduced me to tears by overmuch conversation this morning. One could scarcely describe the conversation as argument, as I was allowed to say nothing. Oh, I know, Olive, that you and Jean will not be so obdurate as Frieda and will allow me a point of view on the subject, but just the same, spare me, because I have made up my mind, provided Jim Colter does not positively refuse his consent. I shall not go against Jim's command, although I may against his wish. Otherwise I mean to accept the nomination, poor, uneducated, inefficient, stupid female person that I am and ever must remain."

"Jack, you have *one* member of your family who will stand by you whatever comes, as you have stood by me in the past year," Jean Merritt announced. "I have not said a great deal while the rest of the family has been doing so much talking and yet I believe I am glad of your decision. I know one is prejudiced against the idea, not so much of women in politics as of a young woman like you, Jack, who is so beautiful and charming and sincere and one who

happens to be so near one's own affections. I suppose disagreeable things will be said of you, yet I know of few women so brave and so straightforward, or better able to bear calumny. And I don't see why people think that marriage always protects a woman from unhappiness; it has not protected me."

Jean rarely spoke of her own sorrow and only in moments of the deepest emotion, so that Olive and Jack both flinched at the close of her little speech, and temporarily at least Jack's problem took second place.

In more than a year, since Ralph Merritt's departure to act as mining engineer in a gold mine in New Mexico, no human being who had ever known him before had laid eyes upon him. In all the time since, no word had arrived of his mysterious disappearance from the mine, and no word had ever been received from him addressed either to Jean or to any one of his family or friends. Utterly and completely he had vanished. Months had been spent by Professor Russell in investigating his whereabouts, every clue had been followed, yet from the moment Ralph was known to have gone into his own tent to lie down until the

present, no other news of him had been unearthed.

"I still have faith that things will adjust themselves for you some day, Jean, I don't know exactly why. I appreciate I have no possible evidence to support the idea, but I have always believed and do still believe that Ralph will come back some day and be able to explain the mystery of his disappearance."

Jack gave Jean's hand a tight squeeze.

"Jean, it does help a lot to have you say you will stand by me. I may be brave to-day, but to-morrow I shall probably turn coward. Olive, what about you and Bryan?"

Olive let go her friend's hand and did not answer for a moment. She was always quieter and more reserved in her manner than the other Rainbow ranch girls.

"Bryan and I talked over your possible decision until after midnight, Jack. Bryan argued you would accept, I argued you would not. Bryan seems to have known you best. He says you are made of the right material for what you are to undertake. Yet he dreads it all for you as much as I do, the fatigue, the misunderstanding. It seems impossible to me, Jack, as you must appreciate, and yet you and I are wholly unlike.

But I believe you are the most courageous woman I have ever known, just as you were the most courageous girl. One thing Bryan wanted me to say both for him and for me. He believes you will not care for the notoriety, not even for the fame, if it should come to you, but only for the opportunity. And he and I both want you to understand that we will do *everything* in our power to help you, whatever course you may pursue. You see, dear, Bryan insists I feel toward you like the old axiom, 'My country, right or wrong, but still my country.' However, I told him the old axiom was not only stupid but wrong. One's country must be right, and so must your choice be."

"Hero worship, or rather heroine worship," Jean remonstrated. "Olive had that same absurd attitude toward you as a girl, didn't she, Jack? So small wonder you think you are a sufficiently important person to be nominated for the Congress of the United States! But don't let us keep you any longer from your beloved woods. Jimmie evidently does not know the poem about the small boy: 'Who was never bad, but always good, who never wriggled, but always stood.' So good-by and a happy day."

"You'll tell Jim to come in to speak to me before he goes to bed," Jack called back over her shoulder, as she and Jimmie started off together. "I must send word in the morning what my decision is and so I must see Jim first."

After a day in the woods Jack was undressing for bed, having decided that it was too late to expect Jim Colter, so she must try to get hold of him before he left home next morning, when she heard a familiar whistle.

"I'll be down in a minute, Jim," she called, thrusting her head out the open window. "Will you come in? The door is open."

"No, I'll wait out here," came the answer back. "Don't dress, I shall only stay a moment. Some business detained me."

A little later, with her hair in two gold braids and holding a violet dressing gown close about her, Jack faced the real test of the long day.

"May I, or may I not, Jim?" she demanded.

Jim Colter shook his head.

"You are a full grown woman, Jacqueline Kent, not a child, not even a very young girl. Not that I remember having reached decisions for you even in those days."

"Which means I was always obstinate, Jim."

"Always a bit obstinate, Jack."

"But I am not obstinate to-night, Jim Colter, and I won't if you say no."

Jim shook his iron-gray head.

"I shall not say no, Jack; you must decide as you think best."

"And if I go wrong you'll help me meet the consequences, even though you would rather I chose the other way?"

"So help me, yes, Jack Kent."

"All right, Jim, unless you forbid me, I have decided. If I am elected, and in ninety-nine chances in a hundred I won't be, do you suppose I will have to spend the greater part of my time away from the old ranch?"

CHAPTER XIII

THE CAMPAIGN

A FEW weeks later, had Jacqueline Kent been altogether outspoken, there were many hours when she would have confessed her regret at not having obeyed her sister Frieda's command. One could hardly describe Frieda's attitude otherwise.

Certainly Jack had not been able to imagine the degree of excitement and controversy aroused by the simple fact that a comparatively unknown young woman had been nominated for membership in the Congress of the United States. If it were in her power and the power of the men and women voters supporting her she intended to be elected. Nevertheless, Jack had not understood either the amount or the character of work that would be required of her personally to accomplish this result.

In the past electioneering had appeared as a fairly amusing pastime. Living in England, she had often seen Englishwomen engaged

in it. They had not at that time been electioneering for themselves, but for their husbands or brothers, fathers or friends. Their method had been to drive about from one village to another talking to the village people and asking their support, or else stopping to argue or plead with the passers-by along the country roads. At big political meetings, which men and women attended together, speeches were made and questions put to the speakers. In the past Jack had frequently accompanied her husband to these gatherings, where she had been greatly entertained. Then she had been a spectator with no personal rôle to fill. Now the situation was wholly changed.

A curious fact, but in the United States, supposedly less conservative a country than England, the nomination of a woman for a high public office was creating a greater storm of protest and of indignation than had been aroused in England by the same act. True, Jack was not the first woman chosen for this same office in a western state. But the fact that the number should increase, many persons in Wyoming declared to be alarming.

Now when Jack went to political gatherings, she found herself not only a center of

attention and of controversy, but more often than not was compelled to make a speech. Never regarding herself as a good speaker, and always frightened, she never learned to enjoy the opportunity.

Moreover, as Frieda had warned her and as she had not fully appreciated, there was hardly an issue of the daily papers in which some information or misinformation concerning her personal history did not appear.

At first Jack refused to allow her photograph to be reproduced, insisting that people might wish to know what she thought and why she thought it, but certainly could have no interest in her appearance. Yet this was so absurd a position, as her friends and acquaintances agreed, that Jack was obliged to surrender. Afterwards she was forced to see photographs of herself, or at least what claimed to be photographs, in papers and magazines throughout the entire country, so that if ever she had possessed any personal vanity Jack considered that it would have been hopelessly lost. Now and then she used to carry the newspapers containing her pictures to members of her family, asking them if it were really true that she looked as the pictures indicated? Sometimes the

family cruelly said the likeness was perfect and at others they were as annoyed as Jack herself.

But she really did not enjoy the political meetings as she had expected, or the notoriety, or the personal enmity oftentimes directed toward her.

Since the afternoon of her meeting with Peter Stevens by the Rainbow creek he had declined to do more than bow to her in public. The reason Jack did not fully comprehend. She had not intended to be frivolous or ungrateful concerning his proposal. She had not believed for a moment that he really cared for her. Peter was a confirmed old bachelor and always freely expressed himself as disapproving of her from the afternoon of their first re-meeting after many years. At the time she had been engaged in an escapade which had annoyed Peter Stevens almost as much as her present one.

Peter had not resigned as her political opponent. The only remark he had made to Jack which was at all friendly was to say to her one day when they were passing each other on the street in Laramie, that the greatest kindness he could pay her was to defeat her in the present election.

Yet notwithstanding all the worry and the work, Jack did not agree with him. She did not intend to be defeated. She meant to win, else why the struggle and the fatigue and, more often than she confessed, the heartache?

Frieda had never forgiven her. This Jack had not at first believed possible, yet as the days passed Frieda did not relent. Instead she appeared more annoyed and more unyielding, continuing to insist Jack was disgracing not alone herself but her family by running for a political office as if she were a man.

In fact, had it not been for her little girl, Jack feared that Frieda would have declined speaking to her. But Peace continued to adore her and Frieda would do nothing to frighten or grieve the child. The year or more spent at the ranch for the sake of the little girl's health had not been successful. Peace seemed to grow more ethereal, more fairylike with each passing day. She was like a spring flower, so fragile and delicate one feared the first harsh wind would destroy her. Yet if she were at all seriously ill, it was Jack she wanted, Jack who seemed able to give a part of her vitality to the child, when Frieda was oftentimes too frightened to be helpful.

Therefore during the spring and summer of Jack's political campaign, if Frieda was not entirely estranged from her sister, it was only because Peace was occasionally ill and needed her.

Moreover, Jack had to endure Jim Colter's regret. Little as Jack had known what experiences she would be forced to pass through in a political campaign, Jim apparently had known even less. Now, although he was not given to looking backward when no good could come of it, more than once he had been driven to confess to Jack that he wished to heaven he had opposed her acceptance of the political nomination with every bit of influence he possessed.

Jack could see that it was agony to Jim to hear her name and character discussed as it had to be discussed were she to win enough popularity to elect her to office.

Not that he talked to her upon the subject during the few evenings when they were at home and saw each other a short time alone.

"You need a rest from the plagued thing, Jack, and so do I. To think that I actually agreed to allow one of my little Rainbow ranch girls to enter a campaign for office in Washington, D. C!" If Jim Colter had been

speaking of a much worse place his tone could not have been drearier.

However, what worried Jack even more was that Jim insisted upon accompanying her wherever and whenever she was forced to attend any kind of political meeting. For this purpose he was neglecting his own work on the two ranches, and growing older and more haggard, chiefly, Jack thought, through boredom and the effort to hold his temper.

He did not always manage to keep his temper, however; on several occasions, although Jim never reported the fact, he came to blows over remarks he overheard. When Jack asked questions he simply declined to answer, and as Jim Colter was the one person in the world of whom Jacqueline Kent was afraid, she did not dare press the matter.

Naturally Jack made enemies, as every human being does who enters political life, and she was unusually frank and outspoken with regard both to her principles and ideas. But there was one enemy she made whom both she and Jim Colter especially disliked and distrusted. He was a young man who had been employed as a private secretary by Senator Marshall and was helping to manage Peter Stevens' election to Congress.

Senator Marshall had made a friendly call upon Jacqueline Kent at the time of her nomination, protesting in a fatherly fashion against her permitting herself to be put up as a candidate.

Afterwards he declared he had the right to oppose her election in favor of Peter Stevens. This right Jack never disputed. Mrs. Marshall led the opposition against Jacqueline Kent among the conservative women in Wyoming.

In fact, among her own family and her more intimate friends and acquaintances Jack possessed only three staunch and always enthusiastic supporters, her own small son, Jimmie Kent, who accompanied her to most of the day-time political meetings, Billy Preston, the young Kentucky mountaineer who after soldiering in France had decided to try his fate as a cowboy in Wyoming, and John Marshall, Senator Marshall's son.

Billy Preston assured Jack that he was making it his business to see that every cowboy in Wyoming voted for her. John Marshall declared that he proposed showing his father who had the greater influence in the state. He protested that his father had lost all chivalry by assisting a man when a

woman was his opponent. If he would not descend to the tactics employed by Alec Robertson, his father's secretary and Peter Stevens' campaign manager, nevertheless, he was backing Mrs. Kent to win against all odds.

"The boy is falling in love with Jacqueline Kent, I am afraid, my dear, as he has never showed the slightest interest in politics in his entire life until recently," Senator Marshall confided to his wife toward the latter part of the summer.

"Nonsense, Mrs. Kent is older than John, and is not an especially attractive woman!"

And although Senator Marshall did not agree with his wife, he pretended to accept her opinion.

CHAPTER XIV

IN THE THICK OF THE FIGHT

"BUT I do think it would be wiser of you not to be present, not this afternoon. I could take a message saying you were not well."

Jack laughed.

Yet the fact is I am perfectly well, John Marshall, and besides I am not a coward, or at least if I am a coward there are other things of which I am more afraid."

Jacqueline Kent and her neighbor, John Marshall, were having an early luncheon on the front porch of the Rainbow Lodge upon a fairly warm day. Jack, however, appeared to be dressed for a journey. She was wearing a seal brown tailored suit and a light chiffon blouse. Her hat and gloves were lying on the railing of the veranda.

"Besides," she added lightly, "I do not believe anything uncomfortable will happen. The story has been spread abroad merely because I am a woman and am supposed to be easily frightened."

As luncheon was over, with a little nod for permission, John Marshall arose and began walking up and down the porch.

"You may be right, of course, and yet I confess I feel nervous. It is nonsensical that so much excitement has been aroused by this campaign, makes one think perhaps we are less civilized than we thought we were! I myself believe there won't be any actual rumpus. But I would not be surprised if a few ruffians, hired for the occasion, do try to interrupt your speech by making a lot of noise. I must say I am surprised that Peter Stevens allows such tactics to be employed against an opponent, especially a girl who had been his friend."

Jack shook her head.

"Peter Stevens says that the kindest thing he can do for me is to defeat me, and sometimes I think perhaps he is right. So from that viewpoint he does not consider it makes any difference what methods he uses. However, I am not so sure Peter himself knows everything that is going on. He may or he may not. He does not come to the meetings of my supporters and friends and I suppose his manager, Mr. Robertson, does not tell him everything that takes place.

But please do not confide to any member of my family, if you should see one of them before we leave, what you have just told to me. You probably won't see any one. They are too worn out and bored to pay attention these days to my goings out or my comings in. My sister scarcely speaks to me and the remainder of the family are busy with their own affairs. Fortunately for me, Mr. Colter is away for several days on business. But to show you I really don't think there is going to be any disturbance this afternoon, I am going to take Jimmie along with me to the meeting as usual. Poor Jimmie, he is dreadfully tired hearing me talk, and yet seems to have an instinctive feeling that he has to stay by and look after me. You have pretty much the same feeling, haven't you, and I want you to know I am extremely grateful," Jack added. "I'll go now and find Jimmie, as we ought to start in a few moments if we are to be on time."

"Very well," John Marshall returned. "But if you don't mind I'll ride down to the ranch house first. I want to speak to Billy Preston. He telephoned I would find him at about lunch time."

Jack frowned for an instant and then nodded agreement.

She guessed that her two young men friends were to discuss the self-same news that John Marshall had just repeated to her. It seemed unnecessary, still she did not feel that she had the right to object.

The word John Marshall had brought was that an effort was to be made to break up the meeting at which she was to speak during the afternoon. The meeting was to occur in a fairly large sized village not far away in which she was supposed to have but few friends. The village was one of the manufacturing towns in the state, and her friends were among the ranchmen.

But Jack honestly did not believe any serious outbreak would occur. She was not always foolhardy, although this was occasionally one of her weaknesses of character; she simply thought this afternoon that an effort was being made to frighten her away. Afterwards it would be easy to say that a woman candidate to an important political office who could be so easily frightened should hardly be entrusted with the service of the state.

Within half an hour, John Marshall having returned, he and Jack and Jimmie and the chauffeur were motoring toward the desired destination.

"Billy Preston will be at the meeting with a few of the cowboys from the Rainbow ranch and from a few of the other ranches in this neighborhood, so if there *is* trouble there will be some people on *our* side," John Marshall insisted with boyish satisfaction when the car had taken them several miles from the lodge."

"What?"

Jack clutched her companion's sleeve for an instant, her voice and manner for the first time revealing alarm. "You don't mean you and Billy Preston have actually made arrangements for a difficulty. I did not think there could be one simply because an effort might be made to make me stop talking. I can do that readily enough and I intend to stop if any trouble begins. Now I think I had better give up after all and go back home. John, you were foolish."

"You can't go back now, it is too late," the young man argued. "The crowd will already have started to the meeting and if you don't turn up and they are disappointed it may lose you heaps of votes. And it is going to be pretty close if you do win. Everybody says it depends upon your personality and good sense and your mag-

netism. You have got to win people over and to make them forget the prejudice against you. You have got to show them that you have been studying this whole question of government and really know a thing or two. Funny to be calling yourself an 'Independent' and belonging to no old-time political party. I don't know whether the idea is a good one or a bad one. But don't be worried about Billy Preston and his little party. There won't be more than a dozen in all and Billy has promised they won't make as much noise as a whisper if things go well and the game is a straight one."

Shaking her head, Jack glanced nervously at Jimmie.

"But suppose they don't go well? I shan't even begin to make a speech, John Marshall, until you promise me on your word of honor that you will see Billy Preston and tell him from me that he and my other friends are to say nothing and do nothing, whatever takes place. If there is any difficulty Jimmie and I will quietly come out and climb into our car and start back to the ranch. And if my speech is no better than they usually are, I cannot feel that the audience will be deeply disappointed."

"Very well, I promise," the young man answered.

The frame building where she was to speak, a rough one-story shack, sometimes employed for revivals, was larger than any hall in which Jacqueline Kent had ever attempted talking before.

As she stepped up on the platform she found that her audience was also larger than the ones to which she had tried to grow accustomed in these last few months.

But the people were quietly seated and there appeared no unusual excitement or confusion.

Gratefully Jack observed that the larger number were women. The men were at the back toward the rear of the hall.

There were to be no other speakers during the afternoon, so as soon as she had been introduced Jack began her speech.

From the beginning she was fearful that she was going to interest this audience even less than she believed she interested most audiences. And in her heart of hearts Jack was always puzzled why anyone should be influenced by what she had to say.

Her causes were to increase the size and number of the ranches in Wyoming, increase

the number of the livestock, and bring the producers of food and the consumers closer together. She frankly stated at all times that she was not interested in politics. She simply wanted the chance to make human beings happier by giving them the kind of government they desired and ought to have.

"I am afraid you will have some difficulty in hearing me," Jack stated, "but that need not trouble you as much as it does me, because after all you will not have lost a great deal. There are a good many reasons why it is harder for a woman to be a candidate for an office than a man, and I suppose having to make speeches is one of the hardest."

"Louder!" some one shouted at the back of the building.

Jack tried again.

"Louder!" the voice repeated. "How do you think you are going to make yourself heard in Washington if you can't be heard here?"

The joke was at her expense and Jack laughed good-naturedly

"Ain't going to make any difference, she ain't never going to get there," another man shouted.

"Perhaps not, but I am going *to try*," Jack answered, still with entire good nature.

But she flinched unconsciously at this instant and stepped backward. A large bouquet had been thrown directly at her, not a bouquet of flowers, but of ugly, evil-smelling weeds and tied with a rag instead of a ribbon.

As it fell several feet away from her, Jack soon continued her speech as if she had not noticed what had occurred.

"Shame! Put him out!" some one interrupted.

"Please don't. It is not important," Jack replied.

Yet if her manner failed to reveal the fact, she was nervous. By turning her head she could see Jimmie seated upon the platform beside the principal of the public school, who had just introduced her to the audience.

Jimmie had jumped up indignantly when the bunch of weeds fell beside her, but had been persuaded to sit down again.

The persons in the rear of the building were undoubtedly becoming noisier.

Jack flushed so hotly that the tears came into her eyes and her cheeks were flaming.

Never had she been treated with anything like this discourtesy before. Evidently she was not to be allowed to make a speech, scarcely to begin one.

missing plate

Swiftly Jack thought of Jim Colter, of his anger and disgust should he behold her in such a plight. She had not expected this nor anything like it.

There was scuffling now in the rear of the building, as well as shouting among her audience.

Jack suffered a feminine desire to weep over the unkindness and the humiliation of her present situation, yet she was not in the least afraid. At no time in her life was Jack ever a physical coward.

The uproar continued, growing greater. Women were crying out in terror.

Yet Jack Kent stood her ground. Quietly, as if nothing were happening and in spite of her humiliation, knowing that no one could hear, she went on with her speech. Jimmie had come and was now standing beside her, holding tightly to her hand.

"It's a shame! She is so young and pretty and is not half the coward any man is who doesn't give her a fair show!" a woman shouted in a voice which chanced to be heard.

The next moment Jack felt a hand placed on her elbow.

"Please come away. It is as I feared;

they don't mean to hear you," John Marshall urged.

Jack shook her head.

"No, I'll stay till I finish."

It was an autumn afternoon and unexpectedly a storm had broken. Outside were flashes of lightning and the rain beating against the small windows. In the building some one suddenly switched off the electric lights, and before they were switched on again there was an uproar that was deafening.

"For Jimmie's sake you must get away," John Marshall insisted.

"Very well, for Jimmie's sake I do give up," Jack returned, "but for goodness' sake don't think either of us is afraid."

Drawing back from her companions Jack again went to the edge of the platform.

"You won't listen to me this afternoon, and I don't want to make anybody uncomfortable or frightened by going on with my speech in the midst of so much noise, nevertheless I am coming back some other afternoon to try again, so good-by to my friends, and I trust my enemies may have better manners next time."

There was a little burst of applause from the spectators who could hear, and imme-

diately after Jack, Jimmie and John Marshall slipped away.

The car was waiting at the back of the building with the starter already in action. Before Jack was able to realize exactly what was taking place she was several miles on the journey home toward the Rainbow ranch.

"Do you suppose things quieted down as soon as I disappeared?" Jack inquired. "You were right, I should not have gone. I wish I were not one of the most hard-headed people in the world. After all, I don't suppose women do belong in political life. I hope there may not be any serious trouble over me."

"But you were awfully game, Mrs. Kent," John Marshall replied, "and I'm not so sure women don't belong in politics to keep things like this afternoon's proceedings from happening."

It was not six o'clock when Jack and her companions arrived safely at the Rainbow lodge. John Marshall had too much good sense to come in, in answer to Jack's invitation.

Personally, as soon as she got indoors Jack felt she never had been so tired in her life.

After undressing and putting on a house

dress she lay down in the hammock and remained there, eating her dinner on a small table with Jimmie seated beside her. When Jimmie had gone to bed, still she did not stir.

At about eight o'clock, however, she arose and picked up a white crêpe shawl, winding it about her, as it was growing cooler. She intended walking over to the big house before she finally went to bed.

No member of her family had been near her all day and it was strange that she had seen and heard nothing of Olive or Jean.

Frieda never came down to the Rainbow lodge any more unless she were obliged to come.

Yet the family must know of her intended speech that afternoon, although they discussed her affairs as little as possible. At least she could hope they would never hear of the scene that afternoon in which she had been obliged to appear as a central figure. Especially she hoped Jim Colter would never hear.

In fact, Jack wanted to see her family before trying to sleep that night. She believed she was still both too excited and too tired to sleep for several hours. More-

over, she wanted to find out if Jim had returned home and if not when he might be expected.

She must see Billy Preston the first thing in the morning and beg him to use his influence with the other cowboys never to mention to Jim what had occurred during the afternoon.

CHAPTER XV

CONSEQUENCES

JACK found the veranda of the big house deserted, which was most unusual at this hour of the evening.

Only a dim light was burning in the drawing-room. But the front door was open and she walked in without knocking or calling.

Undoubtedly there was a subdued atmosphere about the place. Not yet half-past eight, so surely not all the family could be in bed. At this hour one could at least count upon finding the two oldest of the four new Rainbow ranch girls, Lina and Jeannette. Lina was extremely studious and given to doing a great deal of reading at odd hours. She bore no resemblance to the oldest of the four original Ranch girls, but was like her mother.

Ordinarily one could find her in the library at this time, when she could count upon being fairly undisturbed.

Jack went from the drawing-room to the

library on the left side of the house. If not Lina, Professor Russell might be discovered there. He and Jim Colter's oldest daughter had developed a shy friendship from the fact that they often remained together in the big room reading for hours without speaking or disturbing each other.

But to-night there was not even a dim light in the library.

At the foot of the stairs Jack waited, puzzled and frowning for an instant. Then she called softly, "Jean, Jean, what has become of everybody? Certainly you cannot all be asleep!"

As no answer followed, Jack started up the stairs. After having gone a few steps she called a second time.

Instead of Jean, however, Frieda appeared.

"Please don't make any noise," she admonished, "Peace is ill."

Jack ran up swiftly to where her sister was standing.

"How long has she been ill and why haven't you let me know?"

With a slight gesture of nervous irritability the younger of the two sisters drew away.

"Since yesterday, but not seriously so until to-day."

"Then why didn't you let me hear this morning? No member of my family has been near me all day. Do the others know?"

Frieda nodded.

"Yes, but I thought it best not to disturb *you* with the news. You are fond of Peace, I suppose, even if you do prefer a public career to the affection of your family. I knew, of course, that you were going somewhere this afternoon to address an audience and I thought you would wish not to have anything interfere even mentally with your speech."

"I see," Jack answered, with her usual gentleness and good temper. She was wounded, but Frieda's attitude toward her had been like this for some time, and to-night, when she appreciated that her sister was especially troubled, was scarcely the moment to refer to their differences. "Of course I should have preferred to know. Is Peace very ill?"

Frieda shook her head.

"No, not at present, but I am uneasy and we have sent for a nurse."

"Won't you let some of the other little girls come down to the lodge and stay with me?"

A second time Frieda shook her head.

"No, they have gone to Olive. Jean has gone with them. You know Olive and Captain MacDonnell have an extra sleeping tent and I thought it best you should not be annoyed by them either."

This time Jack was unable wholly to restrain herself.

"Why should I have been annoyed, Frieda? I am not so impossible a person, am I? And the work I have been trying to do lately, even if you do disapprove of it, has not turned me into an ogre. But I won't worry you to-night, although I do believe, Frieda, you really intend to be unkind. Has Jim come back? I have not seen him for several days and if he is at home and not busy I thought perhaps he would walk back to the lodge with me."

Never in her life from the time she was a small girl had Frieda accepted reproof in an humble spirit, except under a few and very exceptional circumstances. The truth was that she had been spoiled all her days, first because she was the youngest of the four Rainbow ranch girls, her mother having died when she was little more than a baby, and later by her husband, who was a good deal her senior.

Now in spite of her sister's long self-restraint, Frieda showed resentment.

"It is your own fault and your own choice, Jack, that you no longer seem one of us as you did in the past. You can't have everything, you know, be a public character and a——"

"And a human being? I think you are mistaken, dear. I am very far from being a 'public character' as you express it, and I don't like the expression. Yet it seems to me that the celebrated women I have read about or known have been rather more human than most people, and not in the least anxious to be discarded by their families because they have found other things to occupy them outside of domestic life. I'll see you in the morning. Is Jim in his room, or has he gone with Jean and the little girls?"

Frieda frowned.

"Jim has not come back and that is another thing that is worrying us, although not a great deal. He wrote to say that he would return home this afternoon before dinner and we waited dinner for him an hour. But no word and no Jim. I suppose it is foolish to be uneasy, but Jim so rarely breaks his

word even in the smallest matters, and he might have telephoned. It would not be pleasant to have Jim disappear as Ralph Merritt has, would it? It is funny, but now we are grown up, we seem to depend upon Jim as our guardian as much as we ever did. I don't see how we could get on without him."

Frieda ended her remarks without any special significance; nevertheless, her last few words continued to repeat themselves in Jacqueline Kent's mind during her walk back to the lodge.

The storm of the afternoon had passed over and it was turning a good deal colder. Jack was not ordinarily impressionable and yet it seemed to her that to-night the sky possessed a peculiar hard brilliance, as if the mood of the outside world and the persons she loved were both harsh and unsympathetic.

Even Jean and Olive had not been near her in twenty-four hours, and if they should pretend they were trying to spare her, she knew that in former times they would not have wished to keep her shut out either from their happiness or sorrow.

Jim Colter would be different. Never at any moment in her life could Jack recall

that he had been either harsh or unsympathetic, although stern he might be and had been when he thought it necessary. How infinitely kind he had been concerning this latest adventure of hers, regardless of his own disapproval.

About her difficulty of the afternoon he must never hear if she could keep the news from him. Yet of course if he had to know, Jack felt she would prefer to describe the situation herself, making as light of it as possible. All of her family and friends would be angry should they learn of it, even if some of them believed she deserved what she had received. But Jim would take the matter far more to heart.

How stupid of Frieda to talk of their ever having to get on without Jim Colter's guardianship! In any case it could not mean so much to Frieda, who had her devoted if eccentric husband always at her service. Besides, Frieda and Jim had never been devoted friends. Jim had cared for Frieda, of course, as her guardian and for Jean and Olive, but the other Rainbow ranch girls had never shared his interests and tastes as she had done.

Jack drew her shawl more closely about

her and started to run toward home. She was feeling uncommonly forlorn and depressed. Yet surely the day had been a sufficiently trying one to depress almost any human being!

The following morning Jacqueline was in the act of dressing when she heard Jean's voice calling her from below.

"Jack, hurry, will you, and come up to the big house. Peace is ever so much worse and the news has just reached us that Jim was hurt yesterday afternoon. No one understands exactly what has happened. Billy Preston telephoned, saying he was with Jim and would remain with him. We are not to go to him for the present. I answered the telephone myself and tried my best to find out how badly Jim was hurt. Billy says he was not run over and had not had a fall, only there had been some kind of an accident. He would not say what kind and I guessed by his voice that he was not telling all the truth."

"I'll be with you in half a moment if you'll wait for me, Jean," responded Jack.

A little later she joined Jean. "I wonder if you can tell me the name of the town where Jim was hurt yesterday?" she asked. "Surely

Billy Preston told you as much as that! I must go to him of course."

The name of the town was what she had expected to be told. It was the village where she had attempted making a speech the afternoon before and been interrupted. Jim must have known of her plans and also learned of what might take place. How like him to have gone quietly to her protection without letting her hear of his presence! Yet in what way had he been hurt and how serious was his injury? Whatever other consequences she might hope to escape, for Jim's hurt she was entirely responsible. Whatever Frieda might say of her selfish interest in her own future, of her desire for a career outside her own home and family, she would never be able to deny that Jim Colter had suffered because of her.

"Will you see that a car is ready for me immediately, please, Jean. I won't come back to the lodge. Jim will want me if anyone and I have the first right to go to him, because I am responsible."

Jean was scarcely listening.

"You won't be able to leave just now, Jack. After all Frieda's antagonism toward you she has been begging to have you come

to her since dawn. You seem to be the only person she wants."

Jean nodded.

"There is only one hope. The doctor means to try a transfusion of blood. I don't know from whom. We have all offered."

"Oh, Jean," Jack's voice shook, "I am the one person who will be best. I am stronger than any one else and Peace has always responded to my vitality. Yet if I am chosen I can't go to Jim."

"The choice is pretty hard, Jack. If you can not go Olive and Captain MacDonnell and I will. And some one will come back with the news as soon as possible. Yet you may not be the one."

However, as Jean Merritt looked at her cousin she had little doubt. In spite of the fatigue and chagrin of the day before, even of her anxious night, Jack walked with the swinging grace of perfect health and poise. At this moment of dreadful double anxiety, harder upon her than any one save Frieda, she was for the time when the need was greatest, perfectly self-controlled. No one had ever seen Jack break down until the moment for action had passed.

"It is because I have been so unkind to

you, Jack darling, *this* is my punishment," Frieda confessed brokenly, meeting her sister outside Peace's door. "But I have wanted to make up more times than you can dream, only I am so dreadfully spoiled and do so hate to give in, and I have despised your running for a public office chiefly I suppose because I realized it would separate us. Peace won't know you."

Two hours later Frieda and Jack were in Frieda's bedroom, Jack undressed and in a loose white wrapper, her hair braided in two heavy braids.

"Now you must not be a goose, Frieda, dear," she expostulated. "I am not in the least danger from the blood transfusion, as the doctor has just told you. I may be laid up for a little while afterwards, perhaps not long. And there are many chances that Peace will get better at once. You know how glad I am of the opportunity to help. What is the use of being a healthy person if one cannot be useful."

"But, Jack, you may be more exhausted than you dream. You may be forced to give up your political work for several weeks. And Henry said only yesterday that these were the most important weeks of all, if you

are to be elected. At the very last people will probably have made up their minds one way or the other."

"Oh, well, perhaps the question of my election is not so important to me as you may think, Frieda. In any case it does not count the tiniest little bit in comparison with either you or Peace, now that you actually need me. When I accepted the nomination for Congress I did not know that anybody needed me especially except Jimmie. I thought perhaps I was freer than most women."

Jack was talking to distract Frieda, who had not been told of Jim Colter's injury and so did not realize the extent of the sacrifice her sister was making.

CHAPTER XVI

THE ELECTION

"WHEN do you think we will hear, Jack?"

"Toward late evening, Jim. At least I was told that at about eight o'clock a fairly good guess could be made. But suppose we don't talk of it. Let me read to you."

Jim Colter, who was lying on a couch in a large sunny, empty room moved a little impatiently.

"If you lose the election, Jack, it will be because of the demands we have all made upon you in these last weeks. You had nothing much to go upon but your personality, your chance of pleasing people and convincing them of your sincerity, and here you have been shut up at the Rainbow ranch for weeks. It has not been in the least necessary for you to take care of me, any one of the girls could have looked after me equally well. You are not a born nurse, Jack, as the saying goes. So when you

recovered and I was safe at home you should have gone on with your election campaign."

"Really, Jim, 'ingratitude, more fierce than traitors' arms, quite vanquished him,' or her, in this case. If I'm not a 'born nurse' you don't dare say that of late I have not become a cultivated one. Moreover, if the other girls could have taken equally good care of you, please remember that they have been doing their share, they and every member of this household! Do you suppose a man can continue in perfect health for as many years as you have and then in case of illness not require a regiment of nurses to look after him? But confess, if I am not a good nurse, you can growl more successfully at me than at any one else."

"Am I growling, Jack? Perhaps I do pretty often, but at present it is because I regret so deeply that you have to devote yourself first to Frieda and Peace and afterwards to me, when you have needed all your time and energy for your political work. If you are defeated I shall always feel responsible."

"Vain of you, don't you think?" Jack answered. "Besides, Jim Colter, you are well enough now for us to talk of something

that I have been thinking of for a long time. Never have you confessed to me or to any one else, so far as I know, how in the world you happened to be so seriously hurt. In the first place, what brought you to town on that especial afternoon when you were supposed to be miles away attending to some business connceted with the ranch? Then arriving there, how did you manage to get into the midst of a rough-and-tumble fight? Billy Preston did tell me this much. But I presume you must have ordered him to keep quiet, else he would not have been so noncommittal."

Jim Colter stared at the opposite wall rather than toward the figure of the girl sitting near him, or through either of the two large windows with wide outlooks over the Rainbow ranch. It was mid-afternoon of an early autumn day with a faint haze in the air, unusual in the prairie country.

"I don't believe I feel equal to talking, Jack, not just at present, or for any length of time," he answered a trifle uneasily. "Perhaps I'd better try to sleep."

"Very well," Jacqueline Kent agreed, smiling and at the same time with a serious expression in her eyes. "But, Jim, when you wake

you might as well decide to tell me the truth. Don't you suppose I have guessed the greater part of it?"

There was a silence for some time in the big room, Jim Colter closing his eyes, Jack staring out the window at the familiar scenes she loved.

By and by, when he did not believe she was aware of what he was doing, Jim opened his eyes and stared at his companion's profile.

Jack looked more fatigued than he often remembered to have seen her; she had less color, less her old suggestion of vitality. There were circles under her eyes, little hollows in her cheeks. Yet she did not look ill and one could scarcely marvel at the change in her after the past trying months, first the strain of her effort at electioneering on her own behalf, and more recently the tax which he and Frieda's little girl had put upon her.

If she were elected to Congress would she ever be the old-time Jack again? Jim Colter had to suppress a sigh of dissatisfaction over the thought, which may have sounded more like a groan. To think of Jack with her youth and charm shut up within the Legislative halls in Washington was not only an absurdity, but something far worse! Well,

of course if caught by a wave of enthusiasm and desire for change, Jack should be elected to the United States Congress he must arrange to spend part of the year with her. The two older of the new little Ranch girls must go to school and Jean Merritt would look after the others. The Rainbow ranch and his own adjoining ranch would have to be turned over to one of his assistants, since Jack would need him more than any other person or any other thing.

Then Jim Colter closed his eyes. Would she actually need him more, or was it because he cared more for her need than for any possible human demand that could be made upon him? Always he had been tremendously fond of Jack, unhesitatingly more fond of her than of the other three Ranch girls in her gallant but wilful girlhood. Now, since his own loss and hers, and since Jack's return to the Rainbow ranch, surely there was no point in denying to himself that the affection which held him to her was stronger than ever, stronger than any other emotion in his life.

"Jim, you are not asleep, you are only pretending," Jack said suddenly. "Now tell me, didn't you go over to the village on

the day you were hurt because you heard I was to make a speech and there might be trouble? And didn't you arrive so late you felt it best not to tell me to go home, because I had already started to speak? And after the rumpus began and Jimmie and I were safely on the way home didn't you try to find out who was responsible for the discourtesy to me? Afterwards what happened, Jim?

"Jack, I suppose I forgot a good many things I should have remembered, first and foremost that I did not wish you made conspicuous and that I was older than I used to be, and that I ought by this time to have learned to control my temper."

"Yes, but Billy Preston declares that when he arrived you seemed to have half a dozen persons against you and that you were managing pretty well. It was disgraceful of you, Jim; you who have been preaching for as many years as I can remember that there was to be no fighting on the Rainbow ranch for any cause whatsoever and that no excuse would be accepted by you as a justifiable one. What influence do you suppose your sermons will now have among the cowboys? As for making me conspicuous, it seems

rather a funny thing that neither you nor I recognized that running for a public office is apt to make one conspicuous. One can hardly vote for a person one has never heard of."

Jim sighed.

"Yes, you are right, Jack, but it is too late now to discuss this side of the situation. If you are elected it won't be any better; sure to be worse, in fact. I suppose you realize that if you live in Washington the greater part of the year, you'll have to bear with my society most of the time."

Jacqueline Kent bit her lip for an instant and then shook her head.

"Good of you to suggest it, Jim, but out of the question of course. Jimmie and I'll have to manage somehow, trusting members of the family will visit us now and then to see how we are getting on. But as for you, you are too much needed here at the ranch, besides having to look after the new little ranch girls. I could never accept the sacrifice."

"Yes? But I don't see how you are going to prevent it, Jack," Jim answered abruptly and in a tone Jack had never contradicted in her life. Always Jim Colter

had been the one person whose will was stronger than her own, even in the important matters in which she always felt she had the better right to judge.

"Oh, well, we won't quarrel on the subject yet, Jim, because of course there are ninety-nine chances to one that I won't be elected. I must go now and dress for dinner. Here comes Professor Russell to sit with you. I'll come back later if I hear the returns to-night."

A little after eight o'clock on this same evening, a group of Jacqueline Kent's friends, her own family, and Jacqueline herself, were standing talking together in the drawing-room of the big house; occasionally one or two of them disappeared to come back with the latest news of the election returns.

Earlier in the afternoon the reports from the neighborhood districts had given a majority to the feminine candidate. Later, when the counting began to take place in the cities, there appeared a change in the results, with Peter Stevens leading. Then Jacqueline Kent's victory seemed assured by a sudden spurt in the figures giving her an important lead throughout the western portion of the state.

"Do you think we will know to-night without doubt?" Frieda Russell inquired of John Marshall, who had driven over and had dinner with his friends at the Rainbow ranch.

"One cannot be positive in any election until the next day, Mrs. Russell," he assured Frieda, "but I think between ten o'clock and midnight we can be pretty positive, at least that is the view my father takes, and he has been in politics nearly as long as I can remember. He told me to tell 'Jack' as he calls her, that he congratulates her whatever occurs, whether she is defeated or elected."

"Well, I don't know what to hope," Frieda murmured. "For months I have been praying Jack would *not* win, and now to-night I feel I may hate it if she is not elected. You know I shall also feel responsible in a way since so many of Jack's friends insist that her taking no part in the campaign during the last weeks has made such a difference."

"Oh, that could not be helped! And sometimes I think, though I have done my best to help Mrs. Kent win, that she is too young and that an older and perhaps a different

kind of woman might be more suitable, See, even after all she has been through. she looks like a young girl to-night. I don't believe she cares very much."

Frieda glanced toward her sister, who was standing before the drawing-room fire laughing and talking to several friends and appearing less perturbed than she herself felt.

Jack was paler than usual and there were circles under her eyes which Frieda knew were uncommon, notwithstanding her eyes and lips were both smiling. She wore a white serge dress trimmed with silver braid, her hair was slightly parted on one side and coiled low on her neck.

"One cannot always tell how Jack feels, she is braver than most persons. Frankly, I don't know any more than you do how much she is interested in winning. I do think she scarcely realized what it meant when she was originally nominated. It isn't like Jack to turn back once she has started, although I believe she did find the publicity harder to bear than she anticipated. You see, an older person, or one who had had more experience in political life, would have understood, but Jack has lived in England for the past years. On her return home it appeared a

wonderful experience to play some part in American politics, as the women are beginning to do in England. I don't think Jack realized she might not be fitted for a political career when other people began urging her forward."

John Marshall laughed.

"No, I don't feel she is unsuited to a great career, but it was of her personally I was thinking. If you'll excuse me for a few moments I will go to the telephone again. It is growing late and my father has promised to telephone me from headquarters at a little before ten o'clock. Even if he has been working for Peter Stevens because he wants a man to be elected rather than a woman, we can count on his figures being accurate."

John Marshall disappeared. A quarter of an hour passed and he did not return. In the meantime three or four other persons went away to join him.

The clock on the mantel was striking half-past ten when Jack herself heard the noise of a horse galloping toward the house. It was she who walked quietly to an already open window and stretched forth her hand to receive the telegram.

"This telegram comes from Cheyenne, I suppose it will be official and we shall know the best or the worst," she announced. Then opening it she read aloud:

"Victory conceded to Peter Stevens. Better luck next time."

Afterwards, in the brief silence which followed, Frieda Russell burst into tears.

"But, Frieda," Jack expostulated, slipping an arm about her sister and smiling as she faced the group of people gazing directly at her, "I thought you wanted me to be defeated. You have never wished for anything else." She turned to the others. "I can only say that I am deeply grateful for everybody's kindness, yet the voters of Wyoming probably have acted wisely. All women may not need longer preparation before holding public office, but I am afraid I do. Now if you will pardon me, I confess I am tired and would like to say good-night."

Running swiftly upstairs, Jacqueline Kent paused for an instant outside her former guardian's door. She had been staying in the big house during his illness.

"Is that you, Jack?" a voice asked instantly. "Well, what is the news?"

"I was defeated, Jim. Peter Stevens is the next Congressman from Wyoming."

"Well, Jack, I'd hate to tell you how glad I am. Are you very deeply disappointed?"

"No, Jim, I am not. I believe I feel relieved. But please don't tell other people. Good-night."

CHAPTER XVII

THE HEART'S DESIRE

"MRS. Kent, there is some one down at the ranch house inquiring either for you or for Jim Colter. He will not give his name. Since you do not wish Mr. Colter to be disturbed I thought it best to bring the message to you. The man looks as if he had been ill for some time and his clothes are pretty shabby, but otherwise he seems all right."

The man who was speaking was one of the new ranchmen on the Rainbow ranch whom Jacqueline Kent had lately employed.

As Jim Colter had not recovered from his injury so rapidly as might have been expected, Jack had taken upon herself the entire management of the Rainbow ranch and was assisting with the management of the adjoining place, which belonged to Jim Colter.

"Yes, thank you, I am glad you came to me; I'll ride down to the ranch house as soon as I can get away. I have some things that must be attended to first. You'll see

that the man is properly cared for until I can get there."

"Yes."

Smiling after he had turned his back, the ranchman rode away.

It suddenly had struck him that Mrs. Kent looked absurdly young for the responsibilities of her present position, but that they did not seem to trouble her in the least, in fact she appeared to enjoy them. Moreover, she was extremely popular with all the employees on the place, who would do a good deal to win her thanks.

This morning Jack's costume was an extremely businesslike one, a dark brown corduroy riding habit with a short skirt and trousers and a fairly long coat. It was a cold morning in early December. She had not yet put on her hat and gloves, as she was waiting to consult with a neighboring ranchman in regard to the purchase of a thousand head of cattle.

Jimmie had gone off to school an hour earlier with the four little new ranch girls and Jean's two daughters. These daily excursions to school were an annoyance to Jimmie and he would have preferred to have walked or ridden his pony instead of being

driven in the family motor car with so many girls. However, as the school was five or six miles from the Rainbow ranch, this appeared one of the crosses he was forced to endure.

Half an hour later, following a talk with her neighbor, Jacqueline Kent was on her way to the ranch house.

A busy day lay ahead of her. First of all she had agreed to buy the cattle for the Rainbow ranch at the price offered, subject to Jim Colter's approval. But as Jim rarely interfered with her recent control of the ranch she did not expect him to object to her latest venture. In the afternoon, escorted by Billy Preston, whom she had promoted to being one of her chief assistants, she intended riding over to look at the cattle. In the meantime, beside her housekeeping, which was already finished for the day, she had to look at some fencing that needed repairing, consult with a veterinary surgeon concerning an injury to one of the finest mares on the ranch, and hear reports from several ranchmen who had charge of details of the work upon the place.

Nevertheless, Jack felt extremely fit and not in the least perturbed by the number of

her duties, as this was the character of outdoor life she had always loved and been trained to since her childhood.

The question of the man who was waiting to see her at the ranch house did not particularly absorb her attention. Frequently of late men had wished to see her either to ask for employment on the Rainbow ranch or to discuss projects for new agricultural schemes to raise grains in greater abundance by a more scientific development of the soil. Moreover, there were always persons who insisted that the Rainbow gold mine could be made to yield a fresh output of gold by the application of new methods in mining. But at least Jack had nothing to do with the Rainbow mine, always referring any such enthusiasts to her scientific brother-in-law, Professor Russell, now that Jim Colter was taking a temporary rest from the affairs of the place, the first he had ever taken for as long as Jack had known him.

Billy Preston was standing on the front porch of the ranch house in spite of the coldness of the day and as Jack rode up he came forward to help her dismount.

"The fellow waiting to see you is rather a queer looking beggar, so I thought I'd

hang round till you'd had a talk with him," Billy grinned boyishly. "We don't want another of the Rainbow ranch managers knocked out in a fight at present."

"But I was knocked out in a fight, a big one, Billy Preston, by failing to be elected, and you have all been awfully good not to reproach me after taking such a lot of trouble in my behalf."

"Oh, but we cowboys are glad you lost, though as long as we thought you wanted to win the boys on the Rainbow ranch and a good many other ranches were for you to the last man. No one of us really liked the idea of your either being elected or being licked. But now it can't be helped, it's kind of pleasanter to think of you just trying to run the old ranch."

"Trying, Billy? But I thought I *was* running it," Jack returned, "although I suppose you realize the men are still doing the work and trying to humor me at the same time. Well, it is kind of you and it is fun. Now show me my man and stand outside, Billy, to see nothing happens. But please remember you are an assistant ranch manager these days and hide that dreadful Kentucky mountain pistol."

Inside the ranch house living-room, a crude enough place but bright and comfortable, there was a fire burning in the fireplace and a man sitting slumped before it in such a position that Jack upon entering the room could not see his face.

He heard her, however, and got up and stumbled forward with both hands outstretched.

"Ralph Merritt, but we thought you were lost forever, thought you were—" Jack hesitated and stopped an instant. "Why, we have sought for you all over the United States in every possible place and in every possible fashion! But you have been ill. Do sit down, you can't know how glad I am to see you. Don't try to talk to me, let us go first to Jean. It is cruel to keep her in ignorance another moment."

Ralph Merritt shook his head.

"No, Jack, I want to talk to *you* first. I am glad it is you rather than Jim Colter. Then you can tell me what I should do next. I have been ill and in a strange way and so perhaps I need advice more than one usually does. I will sit down, if you don't mind and you'll be seated."

It was one of Jacqueline Kent's good

qualities that she did not talk when talking was unnecessary.

Now she dropped into the nearest chair, opened her coat and took off her hat and gloves.

"Try and tell me from the beginning if you can remember, Ralph. We have heard nothing of you or from you since the news that you appeared to have been slightly hurt at the mine in New Mexico and then disappeared."

Ralph Merritt nodded.

"I will try to tell as much as I can remember although it is remarkably little. I remember the fall at the mine and also that I did not seem to have been much hurt, only bruised and shaken up a bit and that my head ached a good deal from a blow I had received. I recall going into my own tent a little after dusk and lying down because my head ached. Then, you may not believe me, yet the truth is, I know of nothing else that has taken place in my life for over a year, nothing until a few months ago."

"Yes, go on," Jack answered. "The blow on your head occasioned a loss of memory?"

"A complete loss of memory. How I ever got my living in the meantime, whether I

worked or whether I was cared for through other people's kindness I am not sure, except that I did work on a farm for a time and probably worked on others. I know this from some one who befriended me and partly guessed what my trouble was. Through this friend I was taken to a hospital and an operation performed and my memory partially restored. I now remember perfectly everything that took place before my injury, but nothing in the interval between then and now."

"But that is not important, Ralph dear; perhaps it is better not to be able to recall what must have been days of suffering. The wonderful thing is now that you are alive and at home again, and with Jean and the little girls well and waiting for you."

Ralph Merritt shook his head.

"I am afraid returning in the plight I am in at present will not be a pleasant surprise for Jean. Remember I told you, Jack, that I would not come back until I had earned money enough to make Jean happier. I told her the same story. And I haven't the money, in fact I haven't even the chance of making it until I am stronger. So I want you to tell Jean for me that I am alive and care for her and the little girls as much as I

ever did, and have not yet given up hope of accomplishing what she has a right to expect of me. Then if you'll tell me about the family I'll be off again. I'll write Jean, but I thought it might be best that you speak to her and explain what has occurred first."

"I will do no such thing, Ralph Merritt," Jack returned more sharply than she was in the habit of speaking. "You'll see and talk to Jean yourself in a quarter of an hour. Don't you think Jean has had a long enough period of agony and suspense? The desire of her heart is to know you are alive. She asks for nothing else, has asked for nothing else all along. I do wish men were not so stupid. You always believe the wrong things girls and women say. Jean did care for wealth and position, most people do, but that is no reason to think that she did not always care more for you than anything or anybody else. I'll ride up to the big house this instant and try to prepare Jean a little for seeing you. But right away you are to follow me. If you are strong enough to ride horseback Billy Preston will saddle a horse and ride up with you."

Jack was already up and half way to the door.

"Don't be long. Jean already has been waiting a long time, and I shall tell her nothing except that you are here."

"All right, Jack," Ralph Merritt answered and squared his shoulders, appearing fifty per cent more like his former self than before Jack had spoken.

At eight o'clock that night Jacqueline Kent was walking up and down the front porch of the Rainbow lodge alone. There was a light snow falling outside and she had slipped on a fur coat, but her head was uncovered.

At a little distance away she heard a familiar whistle.

"Do hurry, Jim, I can't wait any longer," she called out. "You promised to come over immediately after dinner."

"Yes, and I'm here," Jim returned, "dinner has not been over ten minutes at the big house, and please remember I am a semi-invalid and cannot walk with white hot speed. I can only report, 'all is well.' Jean and Ralph both appear extraordinarily happy and Ralph Merritt does not look so ill, not half so badly off as I do. I won't have the honor of being the family invalid taken from me. He and Jean expressed them-

selves as being disappointed at your not coming up to dinner, but I told them you wanted them to have the dinner to themselves, which they managed to have along with Professor Russell and Frieda and six small girls clamoring for attention beside your humble servant. You might have asked me to dine with you."

"Why, I never thought of it, but then you would have if you had wished to anyhow. Besides, you should of course have been at home to welcome Ralph. I trust you told him right away that we were going to start work on the old Rainbow mine so Ralph can stay here at home and have something to do at the same time. I have decided on this; there must be gold enough in the old mine to pay expenses and to give Ralph a good salary, and otherwise it does not matter. Oh, Jim, please do come in out of the snow. I want to tell you also that I am going to buy a thousand new head of cattle for the Rainbow ranch. It is all right, isn't it?"

"It is *not*, Jack. Rainbow ranch has all the cattle it can take care of at present. We have stocked up as far as we ought to go unless we can buy more land for grazing and raising grain, and I don't see any prospect of that in this immediate neighborhood."

"But I have almost made a bargain for the cattle, Jim."

"How far has the bargain gone?"

"Oh, the agreement was not positive until I had consulted with you, but I thought I was being allowed to run the Rainbow ranch. Of course if you interfere with what I think best, why it is not managing the ranch at all."

"But I never agreed to allow you to run the ranch into debt, Jack, and that is *what would* happen if you have to pay for feed for a thousand new head of cattle this winter."

In silence the man and girl continued to walk up and down the porch of the Rainbow lodge.

"Want me to give up trying to manage the ranch, Jim? Now you are better, I suppose I am only a nuisance."

"I want you to keep on if the work interests you and if you are willing to listen to my advice now and then. You have some ideas for running things that are considerably better than mine, but I have had a good deal longer experience."

"All right, Jim, I am sorry," and Jack slipped her hand through her companion's arm. "Good gracious, what a hard-headed

person I am and always have been, Jim Colter. I wonder if that is why life seems to find it necessary to give me so many knocks?"

"Has it given you more than most people, Jack? Are you more disappointed over that wretched election than you have been willing to confess? If you like, go ahead and buy your cattle then. I only don't want you to lose money, because the ranch belongs to you girls and I suppose I always shall feel more or less responsible. If it were mine——"

"I have no desire to lose the family money," said Jack, "and I am properly penitent. I even no longer *desire* one thousand new cattle purchased for the Rainbow ranch."

"But what do you desire then, Jacqueline Kent? Suppose just for an experiment you tell me your greatest desire. We were speaking on the subject at dinner to-night. Jean of course felt that she had received hers in Ralph's return. Frieda announced that she was in a fair way to be fully satisfied now Peace was growing strong and well and Professor Russell had succeeded in his latest scientific experiment, and also I am obliged to state that Frieda added the negative fact that she was particularly pleased that you had failed in your recent political enterprise."

Jack laughed. "How exactly like Frieda! It is the things she has that she is grateful for and the mistakes I am not permitted to make because of her excellent advice. But don't worry over me, Jim, at present my greatest desire is to walk up and down the lodge porch with you and see the sky and the prairie beneath the stars and feel the damp sweetness of the wind with the little eddies of snow. What is your heart's desire, Jim Colter?"

"To be always with you, Jack, I suppose," Jim Colter answered as unexpectedly to himself as to the girl beside him. His voice did not hold the light raillery of hers. "Queer ambition, isn't it, for a man old enough to be your father, who has been your father after a poor fashion! I don't know, Jack, I have not meant to tell you this, but I always have told you pretty much everything that was in my mind, and after I say this I want you to forget it. I care for you differently from the old days, Jack. Of course I appreciate the differences between us more than any living human being can appreciate them, the distance from the earth to the stars is small in comparison. And I want you to care for me always, Jack, in the old friendly, daughterly fashion."

"But I don't feel like a daughter to you, Jim, and never have, certainly not as a little girl, so why should I begin now? I simply like you better than any one else in the world except Jimmie, now you have made me think of it, and we understand each other better. I suppose I would have taken this for granted if you had not spoken. What do you suppose we ought to do about it, Jim?"

"Nothing, Jack."

"But suppose I should want to do something? And suppose what I wanted to do should become my heart's desire? Would you withhold it from me, Jim?"

"Yes, if I thought it would do you harm."

"But suppose it would not do me harm, but bring me great happiness, what then?"

Jim Colter made no reply.

Jack smiled.

"Ah, Jim, you never can make me believe that you will refuse to travel with me to the Land of the Heart's Desire, since it is a journey one can rarely take alone."